The New Criterion

October 1999

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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Notes & Comments: October 1999

Boycott the SAT

We have often had occasion to note how egalitarianism turns out to be the enemy of genuine fairness. The latest example is a new program developed by the Educational Testing Service, the folks that bring us the Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SATs). It is called "Strivers." Comparing it to race-based affirmative action, Amy Dockser Marcus, reporting on the program recently in *The Wall Street Journal*, noted that Strivers "is designed to give colleges a tool for bringing social equity into the admissions process."

Ms. Marcus likened the idea behind Strivers to a golf handicap. In light of the recent revelations about President Clinton's habit of retaking shots without penalty, the analogy from golf seemed especially apt. Here's how it works. The ETS has come up with a formula that will generate what it calls an "expected" SAT score for every student by considering fourteen extrinsic factors: factors such as family income, whether English is the student's first or second language, whether the student's high school is in a depressed inner-city neighborhood, whether more than 50 percent of the students in the student's school receive a subsidized lunch, and—if requested—race and ethnicity.

Following guidelines set by the new program, if a student scores 200 or more points higher than the "expected" score generated by the ETS, he or she would be considered a "Striver," and thus eligible for special treatment by college admissions. (Though students would not necessarily be informed of their special status.) One ETS official put it this way: "A combined score of 1000 on the SATs is not always a 1000. When you look at a Striver who gets a 1000, you're looking at someone who really performs at a 1200." Really? George Orwell put the same point just a little differently: "All animals are equal," Orwell wrote in *Animal Farm*, "but some animals are more equal than others."

The ETS pretends that it can conjure an "expected" score based on various sociological and ethnic variables. But we feel constrained to ask: Expected by whom? Such statistical legerdemain always discounts the most important variables of all: individual talent and hard work. With an irony common in the dizzy world of "affirmative-action" initiatives (how Orwell would have savored that specimen example of Newspeak!), the Strivers program penalizes especially those students who really do exert themselves and strive to excel.

We are not the only ones to notice this. Indeed, *The Wall Street Journal*'s scoop elicited a blizzard of criticism. The ETS

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responded in time-honored fashion: with stout denial. In an op-ed piece for *The New York Times*, Nicholas Lemann—who acknowledges that he believes "the spirit behind the Strivers program is the right one"—reported that, the day after the *Journal* article appeared, the ETS issued talking points to all employees that said "There is no product, no program, and no service based upon the Strivers research."

There has always been plenty to criticize about the Educational Testing Service in general and the SATs in particular. But once upon a time those tests, as their name implies, did endeavor to provide some dispassionate measure of *scholastic* aptitude. They were known as "standardized tests" because everyone who took the test was graded according to the same criteria. If you filled in the third of five circles and that was the correct answer, you scored a point. It did not matter whether you were white or black, male or female, Christian or Jewish, rich or poor, Democrat or Republican. The only thing that mattered was whether you got the question right.

Unfortunately, such objective tests have never yielded the results that egalitarians desire. Indeed, egalitarians have always abominated the very idea of objectivity, and have striven mightily to convince people either that there is no such thing as an objective measure or—when that doesn't work—that objective measures are inherently unfair. When it comes to objective measures of scholastic aptitude and accomplishment, they have employed a battery of legal and rhetorical devices to undermine the truth. Instead of treating individuals equally, egalitarians have endeavored to induce the illusion of equality by the skillful deployment of preferential treatment. Hence Mr. Lemann, true to form, assures readers of the *Times* that the letters SAT, though "originally an acronym for Scholastic Aptitude Test, today literally don't stand for anything." Why, then, should we employ such tests? Because they provide a convenient means of *seeming* to be even-handed while actually tipping the scale. Mr. Lemann is admirably explicit about this: "The only way to produce a result that looks fairer is to engage in explicit social engineering, tinkering with test scores in a way that seems unfair to those who have the high ones." Seems, Lemann? Nay, it is. Still, it is gratifying to have the liberal sophistry out in the open for once.

At a time when legal challenges to "affirmative action" programs are on the rise (California's Proposition 209 is doubtless the best known), successfully circumventing genuine fairness for the sake of egalitarian ideology has required more and more ingenuity. Liberal colleges and universities looking for a way of sidestepping legal restrictions on preferential treatment are sure to appreciate the opportunities for racial and ethnic gerrymandering that the ETS has opened up with programs like Strivers, even if, for the moment, common sense has stymied ideology.

The fact is that the Strivers program is part of a new, more insidious breed of what Mr. Lemann correctly calls "social engineering" initiatives. Designed to impose quotas without using the politically unpopular word, they are part of what the English essayist G. K. Chesterton long ago referred to as "the false theory of progress, which maintains that we alter the test instead of trying to pass the test." Programs like Strivers—and notwithstanding the ETS's temporary retreat, be assured that we haven't heard the end of it—are unfair to everyone. They are especially unfair to those students who apply themselves and outdo the expectations foisted on them by paternalistic sociologists from the ETS or liberal ideologues like Nicholas Lemann. Students and parents should be on their guard against this latest species of social engineering. Colleges and universities not totally in thrall to egalitarian ideology should boycott it.

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PBS ♥ DNC?

We all know, of course, that the tax-exempt, partly taxpayer-funded Corporation for Public Broadcasting maintains a scrupulous neutrality when it comes to partisan politics. Ditto for the hundreds of public radio and television stations operating under its aegis: they, too, are models of political even-handedness. Otherwise they would be in violation of the law, which prohibits such tax-exempt corporations from intervening in political campaigns. We also know, of course, that any rumors to the contrary—for example, that these public entities consistently display a distinct preference for Democratic over Republican candidates—are just that: rumors put forth by mean-spirited enemies of these great benefactors of public intelligence and taste.

We are at something of a loss, therefore, to explain the September 10 front-page story in *The Boston Globe* revealing that the president of PBS had resigned in the wake of an inspector general's report concluding that member stations had shared donor lists almost exclusively with Democratic organizations. PBS officials said that Ervin S. Duggan's resignation after five years as president was completely unrelated to the list-swapping scandal. We are reassured by that news. Otherwise we might have thought that Mr. Duggan had been cast as the fall guy to contain another campaign-finance scandal.

We remain puzzled, however, by certain aspects of the *Globe*'s report. The list-swapping scandal, which began last May, led to a Congressional subcommittee investigation in July. According to the *Globe*, that investigation revealed that WGBH in Boston—one of the largest and most prestigious of PBS stations—"had swapped its lists with the Democratic Party more often than it initially admitted and that the list-swapping practice was going on at public television stations across the country." Even more surprising was the revelation that the few groups with Republican-sounding names (e.g., "Country Club Republicans," "Pataki") involved in the list-swapping turned out to be completely unconnected to the Republican Party.

We frankly don't know what to think. The Media Research Center cites a report claiming that the Corporation for Public Broadcasting has acknowledged that

> CPB and PBS executives provided inaccurate testimony to a congressional panel. . . . Industry officials told the House telecommunications subcommittee that PBS member stations swapped donor lists with the "Country Club Republicans," but CPB Inspector General Kenneth Konz says no such group exists. He said list brokers came up with the moniker after assembling names of high-powered Republican donors. Meanwhile, Mr. Konz is suspicious about the industry's claim that some stations exchanged lists with former U.S. Sen. Bob Dole's 1996 presidential campaign. Industry officials had cited swaps with those Republican entities as evidence that public TV stations were not being partisan when they exchanged lists with Democratic groups. At the hearing, panel Chairman Rep. Billy Tauzin, R-La., had warned industry officials there would be repercussions if their testimony was wrong or misrepresented the facts.

Doubtless we will all be able to learn more about this soon on one of those famously non-partisan PBS shows—on "Frontline," for example, a PBS show that ran several hard-hitting stories about officials lying to Congress during the Reagan-Bush years. Who can doubt that the producers will relish this opportunity to exhibit their even-handedness? In the meantime, we can't helping recalling Sir Walter Scott's famous ditty: "O what a tangled web we weave/ When first we practice to deceive!"

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Remembering Milovan Djilas

by David Pryce-Jones

In the spring of 1967, I took a train from Ceausescu's Romania to Tito's Yugoslavia. Travel in Communist countries switched the imagination into overdrive. The books of Walter Krivitsky, Anton Ciliga, Victor Serge, George Orwell came menacingly alive. To ring someone up and propose a meeting was to do that person no service. Each encounter brought with it shades of the prison house. In Romania, I had met a former political prisoner, one of thousands sent to cut reeds in the Danube delta up to their necks in water in all seasons. In Yugoslavia, the people I knew were nationalists, whether Serb, Croat, or Slovene. They led me to the window to point out the secret policemen on watch in the streets below. They also spoke with awe of the foremost dissident in the world, Milovan Djilas. Nobody had done more than he to expose the reality of Communism.

One afternoon in Belgrade, the poet Miodrag Pavlevic introduced me to his favorite bookshop. It was an intimate place. But as we entered, he began at once to back away with the gestures of an actor. Picking over second-hand books was Alexander Rankovic, for years the chief of the secret police, with a sinister Beria-like reputation as a torturer. Recently pushed aside, he might well have been arrested and executed. Flabby and expressionless, the man had a putrid color. Under the prewar royalist regime, Rankovic had been in prison with Milovan Djilas. Communists in the underground, and then together as partisans in the war, the two had been colleagues as well as rivals—either might have succeeded Tito. Djilas was even titular Vice-President of Yugoslavia. These two men represented the kind of fates which awaited even—or perhaps especially—Communist personalities.

When Hitler's Germany invaded Yugoslavia, the Communist Party had consisted of a miniscule group of conspirators. Its leader, Tito—a man of mixed Croat and Slovene origins, and really called Josip Broz—was a loyal Stalinist with five years of service in Moscow behind him. Brilliantly seizing the opportunity to resist the Nazis in the name of nationalism, Tito built a mass movement whose ultimate purpose was a Communist revolution. Djilas was already close enough to him to be sent on confidential missions to Stalin. In a number of books, he was to describe in detail the primary partisan struggle against the Germans, as well as the secondary but simultaneous struggle against the royalists and their movement. Losers, the royalists were eliminated by firing squads or in scenes of mass murder, or driven into exile. Stalin put the matter with customary terseness: "Tito is a smart fellow! He has no problems with enemies—he has got rid of them all."

Throughout this protracted period of bloodshed and revolution, Djilas was an exemplary Communist. A pitiless class warrior, he raised no objection to the killing of royalists and other supposed enemies. Al-

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most alone among the Yugoslav party leadership, he had studied Marx and Lenin profoundly, finding in these texts the justification of expedient violence. His early articles are as impersonal as the work of a committee. At the center of Marxist policy-making was that imponderable thing, the balance of forces, and Djilas was as good as anyone in his generation at assessing strengths and weaknesses in friends and enemies alike.

After 1945, Stalin imposed his grip on central and eastern Europe, anticipating the inclusion in the new Soviet bloc of much of the Balkans. Local Communists were so many instruments for taking power in his name. But the Yugoslavs had fought the Germans as nationalists, and they were not about to sacrifice their independence. They decided instead to rule their own country as they judged best. A frustrated and furious Stalin continued to take it for granted that he could command obedience, by force if need be, boasting that he had only to shake his little finger for Tito to fall into line.

The Soviet-Yugoslav break in 1949 was a turning point in the history of the Communist movement. Tito proved that nationalism was not only strong enough to survive but also able to divide a Communist world that proclaimed itself systematically and ideologically unified. In due course, China and Albania were similarly to adopt brands of Communism at variance with Moscow. Communism in practice, as Djilas now realized with a growing sense of outrage, was Russian imperialism under the disguise of ideology. What was an honest man to do about that? Precedents of dissent within the movement were truly intimidating. To question the party and its purposes was "factionalism," and Lenin himself had decreed that this was the most unforgivable of sins. Any open split was bound to tarnish the party's aura of invincible authority and so threaten its monopoly of power. Stalin had taken the measure of Lenin's warning: factionalism for him came to its natural conclusion in the Moscow show trials of the Thirties and the murder of anyone minded to express an opinion of his own. Pressured and tortured into making public confessions, these unfortunate men lost honor as well as life. A small number managed to defect from the Soviet Union, or—like Trotsky—were expelled. These were almost all murdered in the end by Stalin's agents. No help could be summoned at home or abroad. A massed choir of fellow travelers arose in the West to maintain that the accused were guilty as charged, and deserved to die.

The Yugoslav stance towards Stalin was factionalism at the state level. In his determination to stamp it out, Stalin arranged for another series of show trials, in which Communist leaders in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Bulgaria were denounced on trumped-up charges. These men had devoted their lives to the cause. Like their predecessors in the Thirties, they pleaded guilty to treason and espionage. Once more the fellow travelers agreed that they deserved to go to the gallows as traitors and foreign agents. One fellow traveler was an anonymous correspondent for the London *Times*, no less, sorrowfully certain that these men had betrayed Communism.

To Djilas, national independence had to be defended, no matter what the cost. Compromise was excluded. It was a question of character. Djilas began to write articles in the party press questioning the perfection of Communism, still to be sure in the turgid idiom of Marxism. This was enough to set in motion the series of events which made a historical figure of him. Early in 1954, the Yugoslav Party Central Committee was convened. At that meeting, Tito spoke sarcastically of his old friend and colleague. Impeccable service to the cause was now no use to Djilas. Facing the accusation of factionalism, he half-apologized for his articles—he never forgave himself for this—but he would not backtrack. His party card was number four. Turning it in at this point, he committed himself to becoming a victim. The whole proceeding had the formality of an equation in algebra.

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As the crisis mounted, Djilas hit on a novel idea. He gave an interview to *The New York Times*. Nobody in his position had previously imagined that the Western media might be recruited as an ally to fend off persecution by generating support in the outside world. Publicity could be converted into protection. In the wake of this example, other dissidents adopted the tactic on a scale and with a sincerity which at last informed public opinion in the West. Truth from then on gathered enough power to expose Western fellow travelers as self-deceivers, liars, or worse. So bold a step, though, was certain at the time to lead to a show trial. The interview was duly considered evidence that Djilas had sought to "undermine the people's authority." Given a suspended sentence, he immediately raised the stakes, smuggling out to New York the manuscript of a book, *The New Class*. Now the charge became nothing less than an attempt to "undermine socialism as an idea." In 1957, as this book was published, he began a nine-year sentence, returning to the very prison where the prewar royalist regime had detained him.

A sensation at the time, and now a classic, *The New Class* remains an abiding criticism of Communism. Its argument is straightforward, and Djilas's status as Tito's right-hand man made it all the more powerfully convincing: Communism was not the just and egalitarian social system that it claimed to be, but a grabbing of spoils and privileges by a small number of unscrupulous people. Those in control of the party and the state enjoyed and displayed powers and dynastic ambitions even more arrogantly absolute than the monarchs and aristocrats they had dispossessed. Twenty-five more years were to pass before a Russian, Michael Voslensky, in his book *Nomenklatura* (1980), substantiated the view that Communism in the Soviet Union from its foundation had pretended to an idealism which in practice was only organized corruption, and this was perfectly well accepted and policed by those gaining personally from it.

Still in prison, implacably defiant, Djilas smuggled out the manuscript of his next book, *Conversations With Stalin*, an account of his wartime missions to the Kremlin. Published in 1962, this made even more of a sensation. Such famous men as Churchill had penned memorable portraits of Stalin, but they were adversaries, even if reluctant admiration crept in. Djilas, in contrast, had been a true believer in Stalin, awed and excited to go on pilgrimage to someone he had visualized more as a deity than as a man. The observations have the immediacy of a thriller, acknowledging Stalin's intelligence, his directness and rough humor, the underlying passion and irrationality. Those yellow eyes of his were like a tiger's, pinpointing every minute shift of expression in others. But the vulgarity and blatancy of the man in private encounters, and especially at mealtimes among his henchmen, generated a terror all the more terrifying because so much remained unspoken. Here was eyewitness testimony which has certainly molded the portrait of Stalin for posterity.

A man with an acute sense of danger, according to Djilas, Tito came to terms with Stalin's successors. Towards the end of his life, he no longer bothered to dress up the Communism of the nomenklatura with any ideology, awarding himself palaces and racehorse studs and yachts, as well as a chestful of medals on a fancy uniform which Hermann Goering might have coveted. Djilas despised the corruption and the vanity. But the breach with Tito more profoundly involved different assessments of nationalism. In the manner of his teacher Stalin, Tito claimed that Communism offered a more comprehensive identity for Yugoslavia than nationalism. He knew better than anyone, though, how he depended on Rankovic and the secret police to enforce this identity. Things would see him out, and that was all he asked for. In total contradiction, Djilas understood that this misrepresentation of nationalism was too unreal to last in the long term, and would almost certainly end in bloodshed and war, perhaps even world war. This led him to support the

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Hungarians and Czechs in their uprisings of 1956 and 1968, and finally the Solidarity movement in Poland. Sometimes Tito tried to exploit Djilas and his reputation; more often he threatened to imprison him again. So far as is known, the two former friends never made personal contact again. After Tito's death in 1980, Djilas wrote a biography of him, but it is a thin and rambling book. This was an anticlimactic ending to a prolonged duel between a despot and a free man, dramatic enough to carry Shakespearean overtones.

The name was in the Belgrade telephone directory. He invited me at once. The house was on Palmotic Street, small but cosy, crammed with many books in several languages. In a place of honor, a white porcelain bust of Lenin occupied a whole shelf. A man of slight build and somewhat nondescript features, he had an even unhealthier color than Rankovic, with what he called "the look of a convict." Only a few months earlier, he had served out his nine-year prison sentence. "Prison," he said, "is to go to extremes, rather like the monks who used to go to the desert to think. For two years it is good to think, more than three is bad for the nerves." The authorities had allowed him books and paper, and even underclothes from his American publisher. He showed me the manuscripts of a huge novel he had written in prison, and his translation of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. His eyes were deep-set, a glimmer more of black than brown.

"I know nothing about you," Djilas said, "you may be a spy or provocateur. But if you have any influence, use it to tell the Americans that they must win the war in Vietnam." America alone, he argued, had the strength to stand between the Soviet Union and China. If it withdrew, if it failed, in his revision of the domino theory, then Vietnam and the rest of Asia would fall to one or other of the two great Communist powers. A merciless battle for supremacy would ensue. Each and every country within reach would be compelled by whatever means were necessary to take sides. Yugoslavia—and England come to that—did not have the power to protect their independence in such circumstances.

The man's courage and stamina made a lasting impression on me. Unbreakable, a willing martyr if need be, he was evidently never going to compromise his opinions. I did not report his view of the Vietnam war in print, for fear that it might well lead to his re-arrest. I would be writing in safety; he would be running the risk. Years more had to pass before it was plain that publicity in the Western media threw an effective cover over dissidents and promoted their subversive work. Some little time afterwards, though, lecturing in Berkeley, California—another closed society, in its way—I did repeat what Djilas had said about the American role in Vietnam, and accordingly found myself labelled a fascist.

In several of his books, Djilas proclaimed himself a writer by vocation, and a politician only under the pressure of events. He was a literary artist, he hoped, and his fiction would last. His novels and short stories today seem mechanical and professorial, the products of the Marxist doctrine of social realism, whereby each character is obliged to exemplify a predetermined social status, with all attitudes and behavior thereby accounted for. Autobiography brought the prose alive. In *Land Without Justice* (1958), he described with affection and detail the isolated village in Montenegro where he was born in 1911. It was still a countryside of spontaneous rebellion against authority, of chieftains and bandits and feuds, of honor lost and won. Sudden and violent death was in the nature of things. His great-great-uncle had been a famous outlaw, his great-grandfather and both grandfathers had been murdered, and his father, an army officer, was suspected of plotting against the monarch. Cruel as they might be, such were the customs of his country.

All over Europe, people had become Communist through a belief in equality. Not Djilas. A belief in justice had made a Communist of him. A romantic nationalist

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through and through, a Montenegrin from the mountains, he had initially conceptualized Communism as the fulfillment of the ever-thwarted aspirations of his people to a better life. He did not need to agonize in apologetics over his break with the party in the manner of the intellectuals of the period who contributed to that celebrated collection of essays, *The God That Failed* (1950). The injustice of Communism was irreconcilable with a conscience like his.

That tacky porcelain bust of Lenin in his bookcase indicated that he had never quite outgrown the flawed visions of his youth. To the end of his life there was in his writing a submerged but detectable bent towards revolution, in the heroic mode, with waving banners and an orator declaiming to the crowds below. Experience of course had disillusioned him. No such absolute good as justice could ever be achieved, but still a man owed it to himself to behave as though it were possible. By virtue of their history and tradition, Montenegrins especially owed it to themselves.

With what truth it is hard to say, Djilas claimed to have had some part in introducing workers' self-management, which was supposed to be the uniquely Yugoslav contribution to Communism. But he preferred grand theory to small print. During the Seventies, he further analyzed and refined the argument of the New Class. Various selected writings of his have been published showing step by step how his thinking evolved. His last book, *Fall of the New Class*,[1] on which he was working up to his death in 1997, is a similar anthology of a lifetime's work—or a recension, to borrow Evelyn Waugh's elegant word for the final version of his trilogy of war novels.

Under the ideology, Communism was really about power: that was the basic conclusion to which Djilas came after a lifetime close to the core of the movement. Terror and mass murder, cults of personality, the Soviet satellites, the Cold War—everything hung together in a play of power which could not be otherwise in a totalitarian state. Who whom? in Lenin's chilling remark. Who was in a position to do down whom? Lenin's reduction of humanity to such ciphers laid down the whole dreadful course of what was to come. No innovator, Stalin was a most attentive pupil. Neither mad nor wanton, Stalin merely put into execution a project of restructuring society already well and truly launched. Personnel were required for the task, and they could be recruited only on the basis of inducement and reward. Purporting to be the masses, the New Class was actually a palace elite, completely set apart. This was a flaw inherent in the nature of Communism, bound to corrupt its everyday practice. Even anti-Soviet observers took their time to absorb the paradox that the nomenklatura had always cynically exploited the country, yet the system demanded no less of them.

Generally speaking, dissidents wrote about themselves and their cases, particularizing and adding the stories of the unfortunates they met in prisons and camps. The impact of *The Gulag Archipelago* (1974), for example, derives from the way that Solzhenitsyn accumulates the chapter and verse of injustice done to so many specific individuals, whose fate might otherwise stay unrecorded. Djilas kept a prison diary, most of which consists of abstract reflection, perhaps because he was so much in solitary confinement. Strange and even slightly inhuman as it seems, this brisk attitude to persecution is surely some survival from his own Communist formation. Persecution, he implies, is only to be expected. A free man has no time to waste lamenting; he has to set an example of endurance.

Dissidents, indisputably, helped to discredit and bring down Communism. But how significant a factor were they? Were they, as Vladimir Bukovsky once put it, "only playing games"? If the New Class was both the midwife and gravedigger of Com-

1 *Fall of the New Class: A History of Communism's Self-Destruction*, by Milovan Djilas, translated by John Loud; Knopf, 432 pages, $30, $16 paper.

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munism, its basic contradiction was bound one day to bring the whole system down in ruins, in which case people in the position of Djilas had only to sit back and wait. Refusal to take this easy opt-out is Djilas's claim to greatness, to an exceptional place of honor on the roll of the chosen few who have dared to defy tyranny.

In due course, Soviet dissidents also learned to contact the Western media; they too gave interviews and smuggled out their manuscripts, placing the authorities in the dilemma of either having to give way or to be perceived by the watching world as the intolerant policemen that they were. It became general knowledge that whoever expressed some reasonable and normal opinion in the Soviet Union was likely to end up in the Gulag or locked away in a provincial asylum, to be given drugs which did indeed drive him mad.

Towards the end of his life, Djilas received permission to travel freely, speaking at international conferences, publishing widely, perhaps the most sought-after commentator anywhere on Communism. Time and again in an essay, he could hit on a striking phrase, for instance calling Stalin "a bundle of nerves sticking out in all directions" or pointing in Solzhenitsyn to the "fusion of literary gift and the morally scrupulous." The more he reflected, the more certain he became that Lenin and Leninism were the root of the evil to come. Commissioned to write the history of Communism, and granted access to all the Soviet archives, Dmitri Volkogonov—a Soviet general, and another one-time true believer—was to reach the same conclusion, and it looks set to take its place in the history books.

Not even Djilas, though, was able to predict the tame whimper with which Communism finally came to its end. Gorbachev, in his view, was sincere, to be respected, but a man of narrow vision, a die-hard Leninist. Someone like that could never understand that corruption and the party's power were two sides of a coin. The harder he tried to perfect Leninism, the more destructive its inherent contradiction proved to be. Factionalism was still as important as ever, Djilas writes, for it did indeed "chew away at ideology and the system from within." Glasnost, or openness, at last gave the more and more militant dissidents their chance of a public hearing at home. The New Class had always enjoyed the privileges of ownership, and, as the system began to fall around them, they made sure to obtain title too, in a gigantic process of stripping the nation's assets which continues to this day. At least Djilas lived long enough to observe that events confirmed his central insight into Communism, and his last word was as simple as it was summary: "Communism overthrew itself."

The Soviet Union expired with minimum bloodshed. Post-Tito Yugoslavia, in contrast, has been torn over ten years by a series of civil wars. Its former constituent peoples have turned in savagery upon each other. Nothing of Communism has survived. Hints are scattered here and there in Djilas's final writings about the country's many intercommunal hatreds, but nowhere does there seem to be either an account of their origins or any prescription to resolve them.

The omission is a puzzle. He knew that war and bloodshed were latent in the society. NATO waged an offensive campaign against Serbia, which in the time of the Soviet Union would indeed have led to the world war he once feared. As ever, his own country is at the mercy of chieftains and bandits and feuds. Modern weaponry is deployed for the ancient customary ends of ethnic cleansing. Ever the romantic nationalist, he appears to have become stuck in the heroism of the past, refighting his battles and indifferent to the fact that the very same romantic nationalism was conditioning another generation in turn to fight its deadly battles.

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Abstraction in America: the first generation

by Hilton Kramer

A work of art is an abstract or epitome of the world.
—Ralph Waldo Emerson, in *Nature* (1849)

Let us look at this American artist first. How did he ever get to America, to start with? Why isn't he a European still, like his father before him?
—D. H. Lawrence (1923)

Abstract art made its debut in America at the same time as it initially emerged in Europe—which is to say, in the two or three years preceding the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. Yet the earliest achievements of American abstract art were not destined to have an impact comparable to that of the European masters of abstraction. No artists of the stature of Kandinsky, Mondrian, or Malevich appeared on the American art scene to galvanize a movement in favor of abstraction, and nothing was produced in the realm of theory that came even close to the urgent appeal that was sounded in Kandinsky's *On the Spiritual in Art* or the Suprematist manifestos of Malevich. American abstraction in this period was essentially the creation of isolated talents operating in a lonely and leaderless intellectual environment. What the American critic Sadakichi Hartmann had observed in 1898 still described the generation of Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley, and John Marin a dozen years later. "Many of our American painters, particularly the better ones," wrote Hartmann, "have, in strange contrast to French artists who move in the midst of life and society, a peculiar trait in common, they love solitude and shun life."

Unlike its more robust counterparts in France, Germany, and Russia, moreover, the American avant-garde in the second decade of the century was deeply afflicted with a sense of its own provincialism and powerlessness. As a consequence, its efforts to achieve a modernist art that was authentically American tended to be more a matter of individual aspiration than of group endeavor or shared ideals. Added to this was the nature of the relation that obtained between the modernist artist in America and the dynamism of the society in which his work was created. Nowhere else in the world was the material progress of society so far advanced as it was in the United States. Yet the innovative spirit that animated technological change and capitalist enterprise in America met with firm resistance in the realm of culture and the arts, which, unlike the world of business and politics, remained a citadel of the genteel tradition.

In Europe, the avant-garde mind saw itself as the coefficient of a modernity which society at large had not yet achieved. In America, however, modernity of the sort that the European avant-garde envisioned for its future—skyscraper architecture, high-speed locomotion, assembly-line production, electrified advertising, and similar feats

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of technological innovation—was already a commonplace. What was missing—and thus left to the individual talent to invent for itself—was an artistic milieu that was open to a comparable level of radical innovation. Such attempts as there were to create a milieu of that kind were greeted with a philistine response so adamant and so uninformed that it inevitably had the effect of confirming the modernist's profound sense of alienation from the mainstream interests of American life.

The solitude that Hartmann characterized as the condition of the American artist was a direct consequence of this alienation. What also contributed to it was the influence of a well-established American tradition—the Emersonian tradition of free-thinking mysticism, which elevated solitude to the status of a moral vocation. Compounded of French utopian thought, German metaphysics, and Unitarian liberalism, this was a tradition that made of individual consciousness a sovereign of all it surveyed in the life of the times. It set the soul in opposition to the institutions of society while allying itself with the beauty and beneficence of nature. It was thus a tradition that conferred an exalted spiritual sanction on any expression of individualism or isolation.

For the American modernists who came of age in the decade preceding the First World War, this Emersonian tradition, which embraced the kindred radicalisms of Whitman and Thoreau, defined the very atmosphere in which they committed themselves to the life of art, and the ideas it fostered—especially its peculiar combination of mysticism, independence, and rebellion—remained the substratum of their artistic thought even as they looked to artistic developments abroad for the means of implementing them.

It certainly did much to shape the ethos of the first generation of avant-garde artists in America—the embattled coterie of painters, photographers, and writers who sought refuge from the regnant philistinism of their day in the Photo-Secession Gallery, which Alfred Stieglitz had founded in New York in 1902. One of their number—the painter Marsden Hartley (1877–1943)—was given Emerson's *Essays* to read by his drawing teacher in art school in Cleveland, and it became for him, as he later wrote, the text "I was to carry in my pocket for at least the five ensuing years—reading it on all occasions as a priest reads his Latin breviary on all occasions, it seemed so made just for me." Emerson provided, he said, "the religious element in my experience." Soon thereafter, Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* acquired a similarly high place for him as a sacred text, and in the volume of his own essays, *Adventures in the Arts*, which Hartley published in 1921, Whitman was coupled with Cézanne—the ultimate standard of excellence for an American modernist of Hartley's generation—as "the two most notable innovators" of their times.

It was hardly surprising, then, that when Hartley wrote a letter to Stieglitz in 1913 from Munich, where Vasily Kandinsky and his circle of *Blaue Reiter* painters had come to talk to him about his abstract paintings at the Goltz Gallery, Hartley hastened to compare this momentous encounter to Emerson's historic meeting with Whitman to discuss *Leaves of Grass*. In Hartley's greatest moment of triumph as an abstract painter, it was from the annals of the Emersonian tradition that he still derived his touchstone of distinction.

Abstraction & the Stieglitz circle

In the little gallery of the Photo-Secession, where Mr. Stieglitz and his disciples hold forth for months together, there is never so much as a lead pencil sketch in the little exhibitions which may be properly said to have so much as a shred of a subject, and the word of all other words that may be constantly overheard in the discussions there is the word "pure."

—Henry McBride (1913)

It has to be understood that it was never the specific purpose of the Photo-Secession Gallery—or 291, as it was commonly called (after its address on Fifth Avenue)—to fos-

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ter the development of abstract art. 291 was founded by Alfred Stieglitz, who was himself a photographer of immense distinction, to promote an interest in photography as a fine art. Beginning with a Matisse exhibition in 1908—the artist's first in the United States—Stieglitz also took up the cause of the European modernist masters. By 1913, when the Armory Show in New York gave the American public its first comprehensive account of the modernist movement, Stieglitz had already exhibited Cézanne, Picasso, Brancusi, Nadelman, and Picabia, and was thus well-established as the country's unrivalled champion of modernism. In that role he published an excerpt from Kandinsky's *On the Spiritual in Art* in the gallery's magazine, *Camera Work*, in 1912. Yet abstraction was not the aesthetic absolute for the painters of the Stieglitz circle that it was for Kandinsky himself.

If the word "pure" was often heard in that quarter to describe the modernist ideal towards which the painters were striving, its precise meaning nonetheless remained ambiguous—as ambiguous, indeed, as the paintings themselves. It might be as easily applied to John Marin's landscapes and cityscapes in which recognizable motifs remained distinctly discernible within a pictorial structure that was highly abstract, as to the more hermetic abstract paintings from nature by Arthur Dove (1880–1946), which the artist actually called *Abstractions* as early as 1910–11. At times the word "pure" was merely a synonym for "modern," and at others it denoted the complete absence of a recognizable subject. At all times it was a way of distinguishing the modernist idea of pictorial form—form that was no longer tethered to a strict description of the observable facts—from what were regarded as the "impure" varieties of academic realism that were in thrall to such facts and still dominated the American art scene.

This whole notion of pure painting recalls the similarly ambiguous Symbolist concept of pure poetry, and there is a parallel to be observed between Mallarmé's call for artists "to paint, not the object, but the effect which it produces," and certain strains of Emersonian thought. In writing about Thoreau in 1862, Emerson claimed that "His [Thoreau's] power of observation seemed to indicate additional senses. . . . And yet none knew better than he that it is not the fact that imports, but the impression or effect of the fact on your mind. Every fact lay in glory in his mind, a type of the order and beauty of the whole."

Something akin to this attitude toward the observable facts of nature, which are taken to represent the "order and beauty" of something larger than the facts themselves, is what governed the early abstractions of Arthur Dove. The exact status to be assigned to Dove as a pioneer of abstract painting remains an unsettled question. We know for a certainty that he created some of the earliest abstract paintings, yet we also know that abstraction was never for Dove the single-minded pursuit of the absolute that it was for the acknowledged pioneers of abstract painting. Dove's abstractions are not the kind of paintings that categorically separate themselves from the experience of nature. Their imagery is more like an Emersonian "epitome" of nature than a repudiation of it. Their light is an earthly light—the light of the sun and the moon as it is experienced in daily life. Their forms and their color, too, evoke the organic forms and colors of the natural world.

Dove's was an essentially pastoral sensibility. He was not a man of wide cosmopolitan culture. Farming was an occupation that sustained him in hard times, and boats were one of his passions. As a young man he had gone to Paris and even showed in the Salon d'Automne in 1908 and again in 1909, and it was on his return to the United States that he earned a precarious living as an illustrator in New York. But cities held no romance for him. He belonged to that class of abstractionists who are totally devoted to nature, totally dependent on it for their visual inspiration and eager to wrest from it something permanent and quintessential. What the critic Paul Rosenfeld said of him in

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1924—"There is not a pastel or drawing or painting of Dove's that does not communicate some love or some sensuous feeling of the earth"—defined his quality. So did Georgia O'Keeffe's more specific observation that "Dove comes from the Finger Lakes region. He was up there painting, doing abstractions that looked just like that country, which could not have been done anywhere else."

The modernist conventions Dove learned in Paris and helped to domesticate in America were straightaway placed at the service of this communion with nature. His primary interest was in a certain abstract visual rhythm—elusive, organic, and irregular, constantly changing and constantly enchanting—to be discerned in the diurnal life of the landscape and the seasons and in those objects (both natural and man-made) that nature transforms by its vivid orchestration of light and shadow. It was no doubt for this reason that he moved without qualm or compunction between abstraction and representation in his painting, allowing his inward response to nature determine the terms of his pictorial style. He was, in this respect, anything but an ideological acolyte of abstraction, which remained for him a contingent option in art rather than an absolute commitment. It is for this reason, perhaps, that his influence on the history of abstract art rarely made itself felt beyond the boundaries of the Stieglitz circle itself.

Marsden Hartley's "cosmic cubism"

It is not like Picasso—it is not like Kandinsky not like any "cubism"—it is what I call for want of a better name subliminal or cosmic cubism—It will surprise you—
—Marsden Hartley to Alfred Stieglitz (1912)

Marsden Hartley's brilliant, short-lived career as an abstract painter traced a very different course. Although he was reared in provincial and impoverished circumstances in northern New England, Hartley became a man of wide cosmopolitan culture—not only a brilliant painter but a self-educated poet and critic who contributed to *The New Republic*, *Seven Arts*, *Poetry*, and other leading literary journals of his day. Despite his penchant for solitude and the personal problems caused by his homosexuality, especially in America, his friendships and connections in the years immediately preceding the First World War extended beyond the Stieglitz circle in New York to include Gertrude Stein's salon in Paris and the *Blaue Reiter* painters in Munich. It was, in fact, in Europe that Hartley made his most significant contribution to abstract art. Yet the misfortunes of history—in this case, the eruption of the war in Europe in 1914—had the effect of limiting that contribution to a very few years, 1912–15, in a career that was otherwise to be devoted to representational painting of an equally high order. In those few years, however, Hartley produced some of the masterpieces of early abstraction.

They were not the work of a young or untried artist. Hartley was in his mid-thirties when he went to Europe for the first time in 1912. He had already had two solo exhibitions of his New England landscape paintings at 291, and that was where, before his departure for Paris, he also had his first opportunity to study the work of Cézanne, Matisse, and Picasso. All were to have an immense and immediate impact on his pictorial development. What ignited the spark that accelerated Hartley's headlong plunge into abstraction, however, was his unexpected discovery in Paris that his deepest affinities—both in art and in life—might not be there, despite the support he received from Gertrude Stein, but with the German avant-garde and Germany itself. For while the Picassos and Matisses in the Stein collection confirmed for Hartley his initial turn to an art more radical than anything he had attempted in the past, it was the German connections he made in Paris, and which then developed into the great romance of his life in Berlin, which provided the existential impetus for the painting that was to be his most distinctive contribution to abstraction.

In Paris, where the French had made

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Hartley feel like an outsider, his German friends offered encouragement and were eager to acquaint him with artistic developments in Munich and Berlin. One of those friends was a young sculptor, Arnold Rönnebeck, who was accompanied by his American fiancée. He promptly made a bust of Hartley that was exhibited at the Salon d'Automne. (Some years later, Rönnebeck emigrated to America where he became the director of the Denver Art Museum.) Another was Rönnebeck's cousin, Karl von Freyburg, whose early death in the war inspired one of Hartley's finest abstract paintings, *Portrait of a German Officer* (1914). The third was a handsome Swiss poet, Siegfried Lang, with whom Hartley seems to have established an immediate romantic attachment—a devotion subsequently transferred to von Freyburg when Lang returned to Switzerland and Hartley settled in Berlin.

With these German comrades acting as translators, Hartley was introduced to the *Almanach* of the *Blaue Reiter* group, an anthology of pictures and essays launched by Kandinsky and Franz Marc in Munich in 1912, and was also able to make his way through Kandinsky's *On the Spiritual in Art* for the first time. Being of a mystical temperament himself, Hartley proved to be an eager convert to Kandinsky's call for an art of spiritual transcendence that would manifest itself in abstract forms, and he straightaway set about the task of creating paintings of this persuasion himself.

Although Kandinsky was already deeply committed to this spiritual mode of abstraction in his own work, the *Blaue Reiter* program embraced a far wider range of aesthetic affinities and possibilities. In the pages of its *Almanach*, illustrations of Kandinsky's abstractions shared attention with the modernism of the School of Paris—the Cubism of Picasso, the Fauvism of Matisse, and the so-called Orphism of Robert Delaunay, in addition to the less classifiable paintings of Henri Rousseau—as well as a miscellany of European folk art, medieval woodcuts, and primitive tribal art. (The latter no doubt reflected the ideas of Wilhelm Worringer, whose *Abstraction and Empathy* [1908] exerted a considerable influence on the *Blaue Reiter* circle.) Yet all of these disparate interests were seen to serve the same overarching mystical purpose. Cézanne, too, was drafted into service as a precursor of the *Blaue Reiter*'s spiritual mission, and so was El Greco, a recent discovery of the German critic Julius Meier-Graefe, who was also a champion of Cézanne. "In their views of life," wrote Franz Marc in an *Almanach* essay called "Spiritual Treasures," "both [El Greco and Cézanne] felt the *mystical inner construction*, which is the great problem of our generation."

Nothing could have been better calculated to win Hartley's allegiance at that juncture in his career. The *Blaue Reiter*'s alliance of modernism and mysticism was irresistible. He saw it as the invitation to join the European avant-garde that he believed had been denied him in Paris. And his German friends offered Hartley something else as well—a comradeship in which his homosexuality proved not to be an obstacle. That was something he seems never to have felt confident of in America, even in the relatively permissive atmosphere in the Stieglitz circle. The fever of inspiration in which Hartley hastened to join the German avant-garde was thus fueled by a fusion of sexual passion, aesthetic daring, and intellectual ambition unlike anything he had felt in the past.

Yet it was in fact in Paris, before his departure for Germany in January 1913, that Hartley produced the initial attempts at the "cosmic cubism" that constituted his first significant series of abstract paintings. Always a quick study, Hartley seems to have grasped the essential point about abstraction upon his initial contact with its sources. As to exactly what those pictorial sources were in his case, Hartley himself was not inclined to be entirely forthcoming. If the "cosmic" element in these abstractions owed much to his encounter, in Paris, with *Blaue Reiter* mysticism, their formal language still owed even more to Picasso's Cubism, and, in all

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probability, to Delaunay's Orphic variations on Cubism, which were more adventurous in their use of color than Picasso's. About his debt to Delaunay, Hartley may have had personal reasons for remaining silent. He clearly felt an intense dislike for the man himself, whom he had met in Paris, but he seems nonetheless to have taken some cues from his work. Certainly the disk-like forms in Hartley's early abstractions and their color-driven dynamism are traceable to Delaunay, who in this period, not incidentally, was more highly esteemed in Germany than in Paris.

Hartley's response to Kandinsky was far more complicated. His prior immersion in Emersonian mysticism had naturally disposed him to respond with enthusiasm to Kandinsky's advocacy of the occult as the basis for an abstractionist aesthetic. About Kandinsky's paintings, however, he expressed some serious doubt. While hard at work on his own abstract paintings in Paris in December 1912, Hartley wrote to Stieglitz—in the very letter in which he announced his venture into "cosmic cubism"—that "In Kandinsky's own work I do not find the same convincing beauty that his theories hold—He seems to be a fine theorist first and a good painter after." And writing to his niece at the same time, Hartley was even more negative: "he is a pure theorist and his work is quite without feeling—whereas I work wholly from the intuition and the subliminal."

Whatever Hartley may have meant by this criticism, it is to a large extent belied by Kandinsky's discernible influence on his own early abstractions. Like many of Kandinsky's *Improvisations* and *Compositions* of 1911, Hartley's 1912 "cosmic" abstractions have the look of imploded landscapes reconstituted on a celestial scale, and they are similarly dependent upon heavily marked black outlines for their basic pictorial structure. It may be, however, that Kandinsky's paintings were thought by Hartley to be too impersonal to satisfy the kind of emotion that Hartley himself was endeavoring to bring to his own abstractions. For what Hartley seems to have found missing in Kandinsky was precisely the kind of erotic fervor that was then impelling his own creative life.

It wasn't until Hartley himself went to live in the German capitol, however, that he was fully able to give expression to this erotic impulse in his work. Berlin was clearly the great romantic idyll of Hartley's life. The sexual freedom he experienced in Berlin, which centered upon a young German officer he had met in Paris, was never entirely distinguishable in his own mind from either his mystical beliefs or his aesthetic aspirations, all of which disposed him to find in the colorful pageantry of German military life both an imagery ideally suited to the artistic imperatives of abstraction and a pictorial correlative for its erotic subtext. It was in this sense that Hartley's "cosmic cubism" made of abstract painting the vehicle of a sexual romance.

In that endeavor, Kandinsky was indeed less important to Hartley than Franz Marc, who, though not himself either an abstractionist or a homosexual, proved to be a devoted artistic ally. In Marc's highly colored, folkloristic Expressionism, which encompassed a pictorial romance of another kind, Hartley found a Northern, mystical, modernist sensibility akin to his own, and Marc responded to this aesthetic kinship with the kind of encouragement, criticism, and useful contacts that Kandinsky could never bring himself to offer. It was largely owing to Franz Marc that Hartley was invited to exhibit with the *Blaue Reiter* group in Munich and become, in effect, a bona fide member of the pre-World War I German avant-garde.

One important consequence of this was an invitation to exhibit his work in the 1913 Berlin Herbstsalon, in the company of Kandinsky, Klee, Arp, Léger, Chagall, Boccioni, Delaunay, and other luminaries of the European modern movement. Five paintings by Hartley were hung between pictures by Kandinsky and Henri Rousseau. As he was the only American artist in the exhibi-

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tion, Hartley was quick to entertain the illusion that he had at last "found [his] place in the art circles of Europe."

This short-lived idyll was decisively shattered by the war, which had the paradoxical effect of inspiring Hartley's most important contribution to abstraction while denying him the possibility of its continued development. Writing to Stieglitz from Berlin in 1913, Hartley had already indicated a "desire—to make a decorative harmony of color and form," which was his way of talking about abstraction, in his paintings of German military subjects. The outbreak of the war, though it brought him immense personal grief, initially accelerated Hartley's determination to pursue this pictorial project, and with the death of Karl von Freyburg in October 1914 it was transformed into a series of memorials for the great love of his life. For Hartley, this encompassed not only the fallen von Freyburg but also everything he had come to cherish about his life in prewar Germany.

About the political ramifications of the war, Hartley remained invincibly unconcerned. He seems to have had no faculty whatever for understanding the political situation in which he found himself. While he acknowledged to Stieglitz that he was dealing with "teutonic" themes in these pictures, he never gave a thought to the way the war might affect their reception in the United States, where anti-German sentiment was already running high. (The United States did not officially enter the war against Germany until 1917.) Hartley saw the war entirely in terms of his personal loss, and it was an expression of love and loss that he created the abstract elegies of 1914–15.

The problem was, of course, that by constructing his "decorative harmony of color and form" in the elegies around specific, highly legible symbols of German military glory—most conspicuously, the Iron Cross that had been posthumously awarded to von Freyburg—Hartley made it inevitable that his paintings would be taken to be pro-German political statements. It may have been for their perceived political character that they were favorably received when they were exhibited in Germany, first in Frankfurt and then in Berlin, in 1915. But such a reading of his work seems never to have crossed Hartley's mind. While nothing was sold in these shows, he nonetheless believed, again mistakenly, that he had achieved a considerable success with them solely on the basis of their artistic merits. The exhibition in Frankfurt had even caught the attention of a correspondent for *The New York Times*, who, though he may not have known much about modern painting, certainly understood that Hartley's pictures had been inspired by the war. He described them to *Times* readers as "a snarl of triangles, squares, rectangles, flags of all nations, in glaring, solid, primitive colors, shuffled together, [which] produces a picture puzzle that absolutely defies you to say it isn't a battle." In New York itself, to which Hartley had reluctantly returned at the end of 1915, the political consequences of the war could no longer be avoided.

Stieglitz had been warning Hartley about the difficulty of finding buyers for abstract paintings of any persuasion. Even among the small number of patrons who had an interest in modernist art, abstraction still met with firm resistance. Hartley's new abstractions would therefore have been a hard sell at 291 even if they had been free of Teutonic motifs. But abstractions that were seen to honor Germany's role in the war placed the whole matter even further beyond the pale of acceptability.

When, despite his misgivings, Stieglitz gamely mounted an exhibition of Hartley's German abstractions at 291 in the spring of 1916, it was, of course, a fiasco. Hartley's belated attempt to forestall censure by falsely denying the symbolic character of his abstractions—"There is no symbolism whatsoever in them; there is no slight intention of that anywhere," he wrote in the catalogue of the show—persuaded nobody. The symbolism was simply too blatant to be missed. And as the exhibition itself was not

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so much decried as snubbed, Hartley was denied even the satisfaction of causing a scandal. The net effect of the exhibition was to bury Hartley's hope of making his mark as an abstract painter whose work would rank with that of the leaders of the European avant-garde.

In the immediate aftermath of this debacle, Hartley made one last attempt to salvage his venture into abstraction. In a series of low-keyed, highly formalized compositions based on Provincetown motifs drawn from boats, houses, and still-life objects in the summer of 1916, he abruptly lowered the emotional temperature of his painting, eradicating all trace of Expressionist symbolism and high color in favor of muted tones and crisp, flat, neutered forms. Under more auspicious circumstances this radical change in style might well have served as the basis of a new development in abstract painting. Whatever they still owed to Picasso's Cubism, these cool abstractions were something new—an anticipation, in some respects, of the kind of close-valued, clean-edged abstract styles that would later be developed on both sides of the Atlantic. But Hartley's was not a sensibility that could sustain an impersonal style devoid of existential imperatives. By temperament an Expressionist, he would never find an art of pure form sufficiently compelling to satisfy his inflammable personality. So he abandoned abstraction, which had yielded him his first masterpieces, and entered upon his long quest for a representational style in which the demands of both life and art might be given their due.

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A craving for reality: T. S. Eliot today

by Roger Kimball

It is not to ring the bell backward
Nor is it an incantation
To summon the spectre of a Rose
We cannot revive old policies
Or follow an antique drum
—T. S. Eliot, *Little Gidding* (1942)

For the immediate future, and perhaps for a long way ahead, the continuity of our culture may have to be maintained by a very small number of people.
—T. S. Eliot, in *The Criterion* (1939)

It is now our unsparing obligation to disclaim the reactionary Eliot.
—Cynthia Ozick, "T. S. Eliot at 101" (1989)

Mistah Eliot—he dead. This is the message that the natives are sending back about T. S. Eliot. From our vantage point at the end of the millennium (maybe it should be called our "disadvantage" point), the extraordinary literary and critical authority that Eliot once commanded is almost incomprehensible. This is not simply because Eliot no longer occupies the exalted place he once did. It is also because that exalted place is itself largely unavailable. The culture that Eliot's authority both presupposed and helped to sustain—the culture of high modernism—seems to be everywhere out of stock, back-ordered: no longer carried because no longer called for. Today, Eliot subsists mostly as a toppled icon: the source of a handful of indelible phrases, a venerable addition to academic bibliographies, reliable sustenance for the literary jackals who practice the indelicate art of diminution-through-biography. Just so the culture that Eliot sought to salvage through his poetry and critical writings. One gets the impression that, especially for younger observers, the entire world that Eliot's sometime authority animated is irrecoverably strange and distant. For many, Eliot's vaunted power is little more than an occult blend of mystification and tyranny—a bit like the iron charisma exercised by Conrad's character Kurtz, whom Eliot famously memorialized in the epigraph to "The Hollow Men" (1925). It is difficult to say what is more remarkable: the potency of Eliot's influence at its peak or the suddenness of its eclipse.

It was not that long ago, after all, that Eliot was an inescapable presence. William Empson spoke for many when he confessed, in 1958, that "I do not know for certain how much of my own mind [Eliot] invented, let alone how much of it is a reaction against him or indeed a consequence of misreading him. He is a very penetrating influence, perhaps not unlike the east wind." It is worth noting, too, that Eliot's influence was many-sided as well as penetrating. It did not rest only on his achievement as a poet—though it was the poetry, I believe, that provided the ultimate imprimatur, the final sanction, for his authority. Edmund Wilson, a keen but far from uncritical admirer of Eliot's work, noted that

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"his verses have an emotional vibration, a curious life of their own, that seems almost to detach them from the author." The syllables of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1915), "Gerontion" (1920), *The Waste Land* (1922), "The Hollow Men," parts of *The Four Quartets* (1935–1942), and other poems were for many people irreplaceable mental furnishings. The realities they evoke was—is?—*our* reality. Consider the following medley from several poems:

"Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherised upon a table"

"After such knowledge, what forgiveness?
Think now
History has many cunning passages,
contrived corridors
And issues, deceives with whispering
ambitions,
Guides us by vanities. Think now
She gives when our attention is distracted
And what she gives, gives with such
supple confusions
That the giving famishes the craving."

"April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain."

"Unreal City,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn"

"These fragments I have shored against
my ruins."

"*This is the way the world ends*
Not with a bang but a whimper."

"At the still point of the turning world."

These and other passages from Eliot's slender body of published verse (think of Sweeney, Madame Sosostris, "the young man carbuncular") reverberated pregnantly throughout the literary imagination of the twentieth century. They were not merely "memorable speech" (Auden's shorthand definition of poetry): they were existential signposts, landmarks in modernity's spiritual battle for a survivable culture.

A roster of equally memorable phrases, or nearly so, could be made from Eliot's critical prose: "Objective correlative"; "dissociation of sensibility"; the monuments of literature forming "an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work," the progress of the artist as "a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality." These and other famous phrases helped to inaugurate the New Criticism, an approach to literature and culture that once seemed—and perhaps still is—the most supple, serious, and responsive of any formulated in the twentieth century.

Indeed, if Eliot's poetic stature loomed large, his stature as a critic—as a critic of literature, first of all, but also, more parochially, as a social, moral, and religious critic—loomed even larger. The effect of his essays on literary, religious, and educational subjects is little short of mesmerizing. Then, too, there was his work as an editor. From 1925, his position at Faber and Faber allowed him to help shape contemporary taste by publishing such figures as W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender, Cecil Day-Lewis, Ezra Pound, Edwin Muir, Robert Lowell, Marianne Moore, Ted Hughes, and Sylvia Plath. And as editor of *The Criterion*, the magazine he founded in 1922 and edited until its demise in 1939, Eliot helped to change the critical temper of his age. "No modern critic," R. P. Blackmur wrote, "has had anything like the effect of Eliot on . . . literary people." He was, Hugh Kenner affirmed, "the most gifted and most influential critic in English in the twentieth century—very likely the best since Coleridge." Clement Greenberg—like Wilson, a distinctly qualified admirer of Eliot's work—went even further in his praise of Eliot's critical power. After mentioning "Aristotle, Johnson, Coleridge, Lessing, Goethe," and other figures from the critical pantheon,

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Greenberg concluded that "T. S. Eliot may be the best of all literary critics."

The mid-1970s, when I was in college, was probably the last moment when Eliot's greatness could be taken for granted, could be *felt* as an ineluctable challenge. Everyone even remotely interested in literature knew his poems and essays. They were also likely to know the essentials of his biography: that he was born in St. Louis, the last of seven children, in 1888; that he studied at Harvard with people like George Santayana and Irving Babbit; that he nearly took a doctorate in philosophy with a thesis on the British idealist F. H. Bradley; but that he decided instead to transplant himself to England where for many years (until 1925) he worked at Lloyd's Bank. In the mid-1970s, Eliot's stature was still acknowledged, but grudgingly: it had degenerated to a matter of "Yes, but . . ." "Yes, he was an important poet, but what about his reactionary politics?" "Yes, he was a powerful critic, but what about his reactionary, hierarchical view of culture?" "Yes, he was an important cultural spokesman, but what about his reactionary allegiance to orthodox Christianity?" By 1975, the age was well advanced against T. S. Eliot and everything he stood for. Eliot had once declared himself "classical in literature, royalist in politics, and Anglo-Catholic in religion." Could his worst enemy have drawn up a more damning indictment? (Well, several enemies subsequently made vigorous attempts.) Since the mid-1960s, what the age demanded was formless subjectivity in literature, egalitarianism in politics, and low-church or no-church romanticism in religion.

Eliot won the Nobel Prize in 1948 and by the time he died, at the beginning of 1965, his reputation seemed unassailable. In fact, the seeds of its defeat were already sprouting. It is true that death is a reliable (though often temporary) depressant of reputations, especially of reputations that have enjoyed a long triumph. Among much else, death is an invitation for revisions, reconsiderations, reevaluations. The inevitable direction of those operations, it seems, is downward. Celebrations and fond recollections and Festschriften may abound: the dominant note is nevertheless usually deflationary.

Still, the fate of Eliot's reputation cannot be explained by appealing to this process of posthumous readjustment. Other elements were and are at work. Perhaps the most important element has been the evaporation of seriousness about literature and culture. The loss of seriousness, with all its corollary diminutions, marks the divide between the strenuous modernism of figures like Eliot and Joyce and the flaccid postmodernism that has flourished in its wake. It has often been said that Eliot provided a kind of literary conscience for his age. More to the point, his example discouraged people from neglecting their *own* literary consciences. If Eliot was a "literary dictator," as was sometimes maintained, this had more to do with what, inspired by Eliot's practice, educated people habitually required of themselves in the way of taste, judgments, and standards than with anything Eliot might have wished to require of them. It is possible—just—to imagine a lugubriously comic figure like Harold Bloom pontificating about the "anxiety of influence" and deprecating Eliot's achievement when Eliot's influence was still intact. But in Eliot's heyday no one would have regarded Bloom's blimpish Freudian melodramas with anything other than neglect or condign ridicule.

Eliot's poetry always attracted numerous critics. At the beginning, with poems like "Prufrock," "Preludes," "Portrait of a Lady," and "Morning at the Window" ("I am aware of the damp souls of housemaids/ Sprouting despondently at area gates"), Eliot introduced a new emotional register to English poetry. Modelled closely on the poetry of the ill-fated French Symbolist Jules Laforgue (1860–1887), which Eliot discovered in 1908 through Arthur Symons's book *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899), it was urban, urbane, ironic, full of sophisticated wearinesses ("alert, troubled, swaying, deliberately uncertain," as Symons said of Laforgue). Pre-

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dictably, Eliot's suave, emotionally attenuated manner—he spoke of his *aboulie*—outraged conventional Georgian taste, which distrusted irony almost as much as it disliked urbanism.

But the critical reaction to Eliot's early poems was nothing compared to the paroxysms of rage that greeted *The Waste Land* with its polyglot dyspepsia and trembling mosaic-like structure (or anti-structure, according to those who disliked it). *The Waste Land* was hated by all the right people. It catapulted Eliot to canonical notoriety. He was, one critic notes, "hailed as the sceptic of the hour, the spokesman for a 'lost' generation, venting the bitterness of its disillusion with the elders who had led them into a needless war."

Ironically, by the time the poem was published, in October of 1922 (first in the inaugural issue of *The Criterion*, then in New York in *The Dial*), Eliot had distanced himself considerably from the poem's powerful vision of cultural and spiritual despair. "My present ideas," he noted in November 1922, "are very different." Indeed, there is a sense in which his ideas had *always* been very different. As is well known, we owe *The Waste Land*—which Eliot had originally intended to call "He do the Police in Different Voices" (a line from Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*)—partly to the massive editorial interventions of Ezra Pound (to whom Eliot dedicated the poem with a tag from Dante: *il miglior fabbro*: "the better craftsman"). Pound cut the poem from about a thousand lines to its present 433. He supplied several important emendations of diction—e.g., he made Mr. Eugenides speak "demotic" rather than "abominable" French, and where Eliot had Lil's husband "coming out of the Transport Corps," Pound saw that he was "demobbed," a great improvement. More significantly, Pound's excisions subtly downplayed the element of religious yearning in the poem. The result, he wrote to Eliot's New York patron John Quinn in 1922, was a "damn good poem. . . . About enough, Eliot's poem, to make the rest of us shut up shop."

Pound's editorial contributions to Eliot's poetry ended with "The Hollow Men." The religious dimension of Eliot's verse, and life, became more and more prominent, which is to say distinctly un-Poundian. By 1928, the year after Eliot converted to high-Church Anglicanism (and also became a British subject), an anonymous reviewer for the *Times Literary Supplement* was complaining that Eliot had rejected "modernism for medievalism." This complaint was reinforced with the publication of religious poems like *Ash Wednesday* (1930) and the *Four Quartets*. In a letter to Paul Elmer More in 1929, Eliot responded that it was "rather trying to be supposed to have settled oneself in an easy chair, when one has just begun a long journey afoot." Still, there is a sense in which he would have agreed with the *TLS* reviewer. Modernist though his later poetry is in structure, in attitude it marks a radical flight from certain modernist presuppositions. Indeed, in 1928 Eliot wrote in *The Criterion* that "modernism" (which in the context he took to be synonymous with "humanism") "is a mental blight." The *Four Quartets* are full of remarkable poetry. But Donald Davie was undoubtedly right when he observed, in 1956, that the response to *Four Quartets* was "flagrantly ideological": "the religiously inclined applaud the Quartets, the more or less militantly secular and 'humanist' decry them. As simple as that."

In one sense, Eliot's poetry always presented an easy target for critics; his phrasing and poetic voice were consistently so distinctive, even mannered, that parody—unintentional as well as intentional—was irresistible. Edmund Wilson, in an essay from 1958 called "'Miss Buttle' and 'Mr. Eliot,'" quotes generously from *The Sweeniad* by Myra Buttle ("My Rebuttal"), a pseudonym for the English don Victor Purcell.

> Between the mystification
> And the deception
> Between the multiplication
> And the division
> Falls the Tower of London

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Many Nouns in *is* we find
To the Masculine assigned
Amnis, axis, caulis, collis,
Clunis, crinis, fascis, follis . . . .
Take away the number you first thought of . . .
Stop breeding . . .
Stop breathing . . .
Pop!

All very amusing, that (though not as amusing as Mr. Purcell's "serious" verse, snatches of which Wilson quotes). Such parodies are in the end a kind of unintended homage, betraying the strength and ubiquity of the original. What makes "Miss Buttle's" effort funny is that we instantly recognize the strains of "The Hollow Men" behind it.

The philistine attack on Eliot was one thing. Far more damaging is the absorption of philistinism by the literary elite. That, too, is a feature of our postmodern condition. When Harold Bloom tells us that John Ashbery is a "stronger" poet than Eliot, our first reaction is to feel sorry for the generations of Yale students Bloom has inflicted himself on. But when a gifted and sensitive writer like Cynthia Ozick attacks Eliot as the epitome of a reactionary high culture whose time has passed, the result is far more shocking. In "T. S. Eliot at 101," a long and bitter article published in *The New Yorker* in 1989, Miss Ozick combined *ad hominem* venom and fashionable cultural populism to assault both Eliot and the demanding vision of high art that he articulated. Eliot himself she castigated as an "autocratic," "inhibited," "narrow-minded," and "considerably bigoted fake Englishman," while at the same time rejecting the culture of high modernism he represented as otiose. "High art," Miss Ozick concluded, "is dead."[1]

One of the things that made Cynthia Ozick's performance so dispiriting was the fact that she had previously arrayed herself, if not on the side of Eliot, exactly, then at least on the side of the kind of seriousness about art and culture that Eliot stood for. She presented her essay as an exercise in "nostalgia." In fact, it was a form of valedictory defection. Lyndall Gordon's new biography of Eliot leaves one with a similar feeling.[2]

I say "new biography," but in fact *T. S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life* is a compilation and expansion of Gordon's two early volumes about Eliot, *Eliot's Early Years* (1977) and *Eliot's New Life* (1988). In her foreword to the new volume, Gordon says that the rewriting and changes she made "go beyond revision." This is true. The earlier volumes constituted a somewhat pedestrian but workmanlike biography of Eliot—with Peter Ackroyd's *T. S. Eliot: A Life* (1984), among the first. But Gordon's new book qualifies as an attack. She was never burdened with a gift for narrative, but in her original volumes she presented the paraphernalia of Eliot's life and career clearly and succinctly. The new book introduces a thick patina of animus. Gordon tells us that her aim was not to demystify Eliot but "to follow the trials of a searcher whose flaws and doubts speak to all of us whose lives are imperfect." In fact, she never misses an opportunity to highlight Eliot's failings. It is almost comical to compare her new volume with its predecessors: everywhere she has turned up the volume of criticism.

The difference between the early volumes and the present offering is epitomized by a rubric in Gordon's index. In the original volumes, under "Eliot, Thomas Stearns," one finds the category "Opinions." In the new book, that is recast as "Opinions and Prejudices." In the original biography, Gordon dilated at times on Eliot's "misogyny." There is a lot more of that now. She describes the mildly obscene sports that Eliot sent to friends in letters as "loathsome

1 Hilton Kramer discussed Cynthia Ozick's essay in the February 1990 issue of *The New Criterion*; a subsequent exchange between Mr. Kramer and Miss Ozick appeared in the April 1990 issue.

2 *T. S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life*, by Lyndall Gordon; Norton, 721 pages, $35.

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things": "There's sick fury here," Gordon writes in one typical addition, "an obsessional hatred of women and sex, punitive in its virulence."[3]

In the new book, Gordon also predictably expatiates on Eliot's anti-Semitism—a growth industry these days—going so far as to say that "he did not hold back from the mass-prejudice that played a part in the largest atrocity of the century." Meaning what? That Eliot was some sort of covert Nazi? Eliot was undoubtedly anti-Semitic. Critics long ago pointed out the handful of anti-Semitic lines in Eliot's poetry ("And the jew squats on the window sill," "Rachel née Rabinowitz," etc.). And the comment he made in a 1933 series of lectures—published as *After Strange Gods*, a book he never reprinted—that "reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable" quickly became notorious.

But to insinuate, as Gordon does, a connection between Eliot's all-too-common brand of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust is preposterous. The young Eliot may have been a modernist, but there were aspects of modernity that terrified him. The real enemies, he thought, were those aspects of modern, industrial society that encouraged social uprootedness and undermined continuity with the past. The problem, as he put it in *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1940), was the "tendency of unlimited industrialism . . . to create bodies of men and women . . . detached from tradition, alienated from religion, and susceptible to mass suggestion: in other words a mob. And a mob will be no less a mob if it is well fed, well clothed, well housed, and well disciplined." Of course, Eliot's chief claims on our attention are as a poet and a critic, not as a social or political theorist. Nevertheless, there is some irony, as Hilton Kramer observed in connection with the question of Eliot's anti-Semitism, "that Eliot was himself an outstanding example of the deracinated cosmopolitanism he so much feared and despised. As a polyglot expatriate American who had severed his native roots in order to make his way in an alien society that was deeply opposed to the modernism he practiced as a poet, Eliot found himself as much at odds with the culture and politics of his adopted country as he believed himself to be with those of his homeland."

None of these deeper issues is appropriately dealt with in Gordon's biography. She is too busy looking for "strains of virulence" and "racial hatred." This search even spills over into her comments on some figures who influenced Eliot. Thus Jules Laforgue is accused of writing "women-riddled poetry"—unlike the other kind, I suppose. Gordon has assembled a lot of information in her decades of work on Eliot. And she makes some memorable observations along the way. About Eliot's first trip to Paris in 1910, for example, she notes that where Laforgue before him was a participant, Eliot was "an inspector of vice. . . . While Laforgue tended to reproach women for his sense of banality, Eliot understands the banality of vice itself." Nevertheless, it is clear that whatever drew Gordon to Eliot to begin with was supplanted somewhere along the line with a swarm of fashionable grievances. There is even a bit of academic social-constructivism about sex: "Who can now determine," she asks in a section about Eliot's relation with his friend Jean Verdenal (to whom *Prufrock and Other Observations* is dedicated), "the exact ways people of the past bent their inclinations in order to construct gender according to the absurd models of masculinity and femininity?" Right: "And I Tiresias . . ." Well, never mind.

In both the original biography and the new work, Gordon says that her aim is "to trace the continuity of Eliot's career and to see

3 Eliot never published these poems. They, and other early poems—drafts for "Prufrock" and so on—have been collected and festooned with extensive scholarly apparatus in *Inventions of the March Hare*, edited by Christopher Ricks (Harcourt Brace, 1996).

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the poetry and the life as complementary parts of one design, a consuming search for salvation." Whether or not she succeeded, that aim was patent in *Eliot's Early Years*. In the new book, that original ambition is buried underneath recurrent litanies about Eliot's "trajectory" "leaving broken lives in its wake" and his "intolerance for the masses, for women and Jews." Gordon emits declarations of high-mindedness at regular intervals ("biography . . . can't reduce a man to the adversarial categories—guilty or not guilty—of the courtroom"), but then proceeds immediately with some damning aside ("undoubtedly, an infection is there in Eliot—hate.") Gordon's animus even extends to Eliot's forebears. In her original biography, she tells us that Andrew Eliot "was believed to have officiated at the Salem witch trials." In her new redaction we read instead that "he was drawn into the frenzy of the Salem witch trials, where he condemned innocents to death." The implication, presumably, is that we shouldn't be surprised that Eliot turned out to be a fanatic: after all, the man had witch-burners in his background.

I earlier quoted Edmund Wilson's observation that Eliot's "verses have an emotional vibration, a curious life of their own, that seems almost to detach them from the author." Wilson continues: "Of no other poet, perhaps, does a bon mot of Cocteau's seem so true: The artist is a kind of prison from which the works of art escape."

This is true. And it is something that requires uncommon tact and delicacy from any biographer who wishes to present us with Eliot the artist and not a pathetic caricature. (Eliot explicitly stated that he did not want a biography: now we know why.) Eliot is worthy of attention not because he had certain attitudes about women or Jews or education or religion of which we disapprove today. He is worthy of attention first of all because he wrote poetry possessed of those "vibrations," that "curious life," of which Wilson spoke. Of course there is a biographical correlative to much of Eliot's poetry. And when we read this oft-quoted passage in *The Waste Land*—

> "My nerves are bad to-night. Yes, bad.
> Stay with me.
> "Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak.
> "What are you thinking of? What thinking?
> What?
> "I never know what you are thinking. Think."

—it is perhaps illuminating to know that Eliot wrote most of the poem while recuperating from a nervous breakdown in 1921 and that his first wife, Vivienne Haigh-Wood, was a drug-sodden hysterical invalid who eventually went mad. Bertrand Russell, who had an affair with Vivienne not long after she married Eliot, wrote about it to a friend: "At last I spent a night with her. *It was utter hell*. There was a quality of loathsomeness about it which I can't describe." "She gave the impression of absolute terror," another acquaintance recalled,

> of a person who's seen a hideous goblin. . . . Her face all drawn and white, with wild, frightened, angry eyes. An over-intensity over nothing, you see. Supposing you were to say to her, "Oh, will you have some more cake," she'd say "What's that? What do you mean? What do you say that for?" She was terrifying. At the end of an hour I was absolutely exhausted, sucked dry. And I said to myself: Poor Tom, this is enough! But she was his muse all the same.

Well, maybe. Vivienne undoubtedly made her contributions to Eliot's work. (It was she, for example, who came up with the title for *The Criterion*: Eliot had intended to call it *The London Review*.) But lots of people have hysterical, half-mad spouses. Few are great poets. Eliot himself once remarked that "various critics have done me the honour to interpret [*The Waste Land*] in terms of criticism of the contemporary world, have considered it, indeed, as an important bit of social criticism. To me it was only the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life; it was just a

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piece of rhythmical grumbling." But that is disingenuous. The grouse may have been personal and insignificant; the poem—*qua* poem, not biographical artifact—is neither merely personal nor insignificant. As Eliot famously noted in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919),

> It is not in his personal emotions, the emotions provoked by particular events in his life, that the poet is in any way remarkable or interesting. His particular emotions may be simple, or crude, or flat. The emotion in his poetry will be a very complex thing, but not with the complexity of the emotions of people who have very complex or unusual emotions in life. . . . Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things.

For Eliot, writing *The Waste Land* may have been in part a personal catharsis. For us, it is the *impersonality* of the emotion that makes the poem significant. It speaks to us not of Eliot's trauma but of a trauma inseparable from our culture.

The chaos of Eliot's emotional life in the 1910s and 1920s did not prevent him from carefully stage-managing his literary career. As soon as he gave up on an academic career, in 1914, he threw himself into London literary life. Writing to his mother in 1919, he spoke proudly of the "privileged position" he occupied: "There is a small and select public which regards me as the best living critic, as well as the best living poet, in England. . . . I really think that I have far more *influence* on English letters than any other American has ever had, unless it be Henry James." His pride was all the more justified because, as he noted in another letter, for an American, "getting recognized in English letters is like breaking open a safe." Eliot displayed great deliberation and canniness in his pursuit of literary fame. There are, he wrote to a former teacher from Harvard in 1919,

> only two ways in which a writer can become important—to write a great deal, and have his writings appear everywhere, or to write very little. It is a question of temperament. I write very little, and I should not become more powerful by increasing my output. My reputation in London is built upon one small volume of verse, and is kept up by printing two or three more poems in a year. The only thing that matters is that these should be perfect in their kind, so that each should be an event.

And so it was. Eliot's collected poems, excluding the children's verse, runs to one-hundred-and-forty-odd pages; thirty or more of those pages are given over to "minor" or "unfinished" poems. But Eliot made up in concentration what he lacked in quantity. From *Prufrock* through the *Four Quartets*, publication of Eliot's poems always was a galvanizing literary event, riveting attention even when it did not elicit unqualified assent.

The chief reason that Eliot commanded the attention he did was doubtless the originality, power, and quality of his work. The work was the indispensable presupposition. But beyond that, Eliot animated everything he touched with a rare passion and urgency of conviction. "Culture," he wrote in *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1948), "may even be defined as that which makes life worth living." And although after his conversion he always viewed culture as inseparable from religion ("if Christianity goes," he wrote, "the whole of our culture goes"), he nonetheless communicated through his poetry and criticism a sense that matters of great, of absolute, moment were being broached. To read Eliot is an apprenticeship in seriousness about the things that require it. This is not to say that Eliot was always somber. Far from it. There is an element of impish playfulness in much of his work. W. H. Auden was right that in the household that was T. S. Eliot, a stately

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archdeacon lived together with a querulous old peasant woman who had experienced famines, pogroms, the lot, as well as a mischievous boy prone to practical jokes. It is not surprising that the author of *The Waste Land* was also the author of *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* or that he was an avid admirer of vaudeville and the Marx Brothers.[4] The great critic E. R. Curtius, who translated *The Waste Land* into German, recalled that when he first read the poem "it captivated me with sudden and dazzling flashes of mystery and music, with a resonant happiness."

At first, "resonant happiness" may seem odd. After all, as Curtius went on to note, "with Eliot the depressive element predominates." In the early poems there is often a permeating nimbus of impotence, exhaustion, dryness. Later, that texture of feeling is absorbed into an atmosphere of religious angst. And yet Curtius is right. Reading Eliot imparts a peculiar sense of buoyancy, of tensed vitality—in Edmund Wilson's phrases, "vibrations" and "curious life." One reason, I believe, is that Eliot is everywhere embarked on a voyage of discovery. Many critics have noted a progression in Eliot's development from the aestheticism of Arnold and Pater through ironic despondency to resignation and, finally, Christian affirmation. I have no doubt that there is some such development in Eliot's thought. But the leitmotif of Eliot's journey is a craving for reality. That craving is the source of the "resonant happiness" Curtius discerned. It is the source of Eliot's religious convictions—"Man is man," he wrote in an essay on humanism, "because he can recognize supernatural realities, not because he can invent them." Eliot's craving for reality also stands behind his repeated admonitions about the perils of accepting aesthetic substitutes. "We know too much and are convinced of too little," he warned in "A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry." "Our literature is a substitute for religion, and so is our religion." In *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933), he reflects more fully on this point.

> Nothing in this world or the next is a substitute for anything else; and if you find you must do without something, such as religious faith or philosophic belief, then you must just do without it. I can persuade myself . . . that some of the things that I can hope to get are better worth having than some of the things I cannot get; or I may hope to alter myself so as to want different things; but I cannot persuade myself that it is the same desires that are satisifed, or that I have in effect the same thing under a different name.

Eliot was obsessed with reality. That is the ultimate source of his power as a poet and his authority as a critic. He was everywhere engaged in a battle against ersatz: ersatz culture, ersatz religion, ersatz humanity. That, finally, is what makes even the late, religious Eliot congenial to modernism: his impatience with imposture. In "Burnt Norton," Eliot wrote that "human kind/ Cannot bear very much reality." It was his lonely task to remind us of this even as he set about coaxing us toward greater and greater feats of endurance.

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4 Gordon recounts the visit that Groucho Marx and his wife made to meet the Eliots in 1964. Groucho fortified himself by reading *Murder in the Cathedral* twice, *The Waste Land* three times, and brushing up on *King Lear* for good measure. "Well, sir," Groucho wrote in a letter,

> as the cocktails were served, there was a momentary lull. . . . So, apropos of practically nothing . . . I tossed in a quotation from *The Waste Land*. That, I thought, will show him I've read a thing or two besides my press notices from Vaudeville.
>
> Eliot smiled faintly—as though to say he was thoroughly familiar with his poems and didn't need me to recite them. So I took a whack at *King Lear*. . .
>
> That, too, failed to bowl over the poet. He seemed more interested in discussing *Animal Crackers* and *A Night at the Opera*. He quoted a joke—one of mine—that I had long since forgotten. Now it was my turn to smile faintly.

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Women & politics: Madame Roland

by Renee Winegarten

I should need a Madame Roland as my reader.
—Stendhal

That unpunished vice, reading.
—Valéry Larbaud

If anyone helps to overturn conventional notions about the role of women in politics in eighteenth-century France it is Marie-Jeanne (Manon) Phlipon, later Mme Roland (1754–1793). It was not simply the French Revolution of 1789 that inspired her concern with history, society, and the art of government. That interest was of long standing in a deeply studious young woman who loved reading, even works by the most difficult thinkers, and who read widely for self-instruction and self-knowledge as well as pleasure. Much cherished by her parents as the sole survivor of seven children, she was endowed with a strong sense of her own worth and capabilities.

In 1776, Manon, daughter of a well-established master engraver, tried to call on the celebrated recluse, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. She failed to get past Thérèse Levasseur, Rousseau's long-suffering mistress, who by then was his wife. As for Manon's letter, Rousseau in his reply thought, or affected to think, that it was written by a man. What this adventure took in the way of enterprise, daring, and energy for a modest young woman of the day, careful of public opinion (as indeed Rousseau himself advised in *Emile*), may readily be supposed.

Disappointed but not disillusioned, she wrote to Sophie Cannet, her friend of convent school days, "His genius has warmed my soul; I have felt it set me aflame, uplift me and ennoble me." It was not just his novel, *Julie, ou la Nouvelle Héloïse*, qualified as "a masterpiece of feeling," that seized her imagination, but also his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, his *Social Contract*, and other works which contained "countless interesting truths in connection with government." Political matters ceaselessly occupied her thoughts. Despite Rousseau's faults of character (for which she found excuses), in her eyes he remained not just a genius but a friend of humanity, its benefactor, a man of virtue, and "a citizen"—high praise indeed.

This admiration never waned, and it was perhaps all the more intense because she had discovered Rousseau fairly late, when she was emotionally vulnerable at her mother's untimely death. He joined her favorite authors: Plutarch, with his portraits of the great men of antiquity, and Montaigne, lauded for his probing self-inquiry and candor. She told Sophie Cannet that she loved Rousseau "beyond all expression. I carry Rousseau in my heart." He is "my breviary," she declared.

As if all this were not enough, she once confessed, in a strange cry addressed to her idol, "divine Rousseau": "You are like me. I find myself in you. You transform me *into you, or you are none other* than myself" (her emphasis). Here is a curious example of lit-

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erary transmutation. Although Don Quixote, whose wits were turned by reading novels of chivalry, wanted to serve as a knight errant like Amadis of Gaul, he did not want *to be* Amadis, or think he was. Given her passionate enthusiasm for Rousseau, it is no surprise to learn that some years later she made a pilgrimage to Ermenonville, where the author of the *Confessions* then lay buried on an island in the park. She and her husband would also visit sites associated with Rousseau when they were in Geneva, the great man's birthplace. She waxed indignant at the way he had been persecuted.

Clearly, this *exaltée*, who would become the supreme political heroine of the French Revolution for Stendhal and Carlyle, was already an exceptional young woman. "I admit that I do not feel I am made for ordinary things," she had told Sophie Cannet. She came from what she herself called—in 1777—"*la moyenne classe*," the respectable lower middle class of artisans-cum-artists, craftsmen, tradespeople, as distinct from those she defined as belonging to the "common" or the "most numerous" class. In this she was unlike Mme de Staël, whose origins lay in the bourgeoisie of high finance, or Mme de Genlis who was descended from the old nobility. However, along with them—and all women of intelligence of the day and after—she was preoccupied with the glaring shortcomings of female education and the need for its urgent reform.

Sainte-Beuve, that subtle nineteenth-century student of eminent women, was to write that the name of Mme Roland "marks a date." Starting from her, thought Sainte-Beuve, women who came after Rousseau were divided from those who preceded him. Following Rousseau's *Confessions*, she herself would write frankly in her remarkable *Mémoires* about such matters as menstruation and female sexuality. Thus (to Sainte-Beuve's protestations of distaste) she related the unwanted sexual attentions of one of her father's pupils when she was a girl, and she also conveyed the shock and disappointment of her wedding night. In her memoirs she alluded to her imaginative sensibility, her "wandering and romantic imagination," her "romantic mind." She could have found the word "romantic" in one of her favorite writers, the Scottish poet James Thomson, melancholy lover of nature, virtue, and liberty.

Manon's strikingly revealing letters to Sophie and Henriette Cannet, the sisters from Amiens who were her convent school friends, cover many years and occupy large volumes. In some respects they foreshadow her memoirs, at times resembling a personal diary. Here can be found, conveyed at length, not only the day-to-day details of her domestic life, but also her moods, feelings, reflections, and opinions. She recounts her unutterable distress at her mother's death. Then she has to endure her father's change of character, his rapid decline into dissipation and ruin. Here, too, are portraits and judgments of the people she encountered—what she liked to call her study of men. This is accompanied by her unrelenting self-analysis in the characteristically French manner (the acknowledgment of "a strong dose of amour-propre," for instance). In these letters she could test her writing skills and refine her style. Indeed, she was then something of a frustrated writer, enraged when she believed that some of her letters were lost or had been intercepted by the censors. She was also an actress looking for a role.

Some of these letters report on her reading and presuppose similar interests in her friends or stimulate discussion between them. On occasion, they are like didactic literary essays. Among the most singular (from January 1777) is her account of Jean-Louis Delolme's study of the English constitution. It occupies many pages and gives an insight into her political views at the time. Delolme, a Swiss republican, was "a truly political mind" in her judgment. For Manon became a republican long before Robespierre. (According to her, in the summer of 1791 the Incorruptible was still ask-

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ing with a nervous laugh what exactly a republic was). It appeared to her—a convinced Anglophile keen on English literature—that the English were enjoying perfect liberty at a time when the French had to labor under absolute monarchy. She felt nothing but contempt for "the insulting Asiatic luxury" of the French kings. In her view, the fall and execution of Charles I in 1649 clearly set an example to the entire world (as indeed it did). As for the Glorious Revolution of 1688, with the Bill of Rights it had established the true principles of societies. By expelling James II, a king who had violated his solemn oaths, this revolution had affirmed the doctrine of resistance by oppressed peoples. The violation of the royal oath would be one of her chief accusations against Louis XVI after his attempt to flee abroad and his arrest at Varennes in June 1791. With the removal of a despotic royal house, the English Revolution of 1688 demonstrated that nations do not belong to kings, she declared; on the contrary, legislative powers are rightly assigned to parliaments alone. There must be elections and freedom of the press. These, then, were the advanced ideas circulating among intelligent convent-bred young ladies in Paris and the provinces. They were among the convictions that Manon would carry into the French Revolution.

It was not only from books that Manon drew her opinions or had them confirmed. If she encountered Frenchmen who had travelled to India or lived in Russia, or foreign visitors, she seized the opportunity to question them, and she formed a political map of the world in her head, as she put it. For instance, she asked some "Americans" (who turned out to be wealthy inhabitants of Santo Domingo) about the War of Independence and "the condition of the insurgents." As she wrote to Sophie Cannet in October 1777, "I am very pleased to think as you do about the importance of this revolution. I regard it with keen interest, and I wish for the liberty of America, as just vengeance for the violation of natural law in that unhappy continent, so little shaped for unhappiness." Together with sentiment, the note of intransigence, morbid violence, and revenge can already be heard—that tone of ruthless ancient Roman severity, or what passed for it in eighteenth-century France. There was, at the same time, a kind of self-assurance or self-congratulation at the "advances" that had been made in political thinking, presumably by Rousseau in particular. "We know more about the true principles of good policy in the last twenty years than all the governments of antiquity," wrote Manon to Sophie.

The consequence of this sense of progress in political thinking meant that one could now be certain of what true political principles were, who was in possession of them, and who was not. This attitude would lead to the notion of "true patriots" (oneself and one's friends) and "false patriots" (one's opponents), as well as to some dire misjudgments. A number of those who were thought to be true would unluckily turn out to be false. While Manon's high principles were directed to the service of humanity, she had an extremely poor view of the generality of men, an opinion repeated many times in her letters and her memoirs. She does not appear to have noticed, acute as she was, the contradiction between her passionate devotion to the regeneration of humanity and her convinced misanthropy, presumably fostered to some degree by personal experience.

Her charm and intelligence, and more particularly the prospect of her dowry, had attracted a number of suitors. Unfortunately, her father—now a merry widower—lost most of her portion in gambling and dissipation. Various suitors faded quietly along with her financial prospects. She appears to have become really attached to a young writer named La Blancherie, who failed her in this respect. The fact was that she had cultivated her sensibility, as the eighteenth century would have it, and she had, as it were, educated herself above her station. Several merchants sued for her hand. "Had I lived with Plutarch and the philosophers

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to marry a merchant without feelings similar to my own?" she was to ask rhetorically in her memoirs. There were a few cultivated men somewhat advanced in years, who shared her interests, gave her free access to their libraries, escorted her to literary or musical gatherings (she was herself a gifted musician). Whenever she encountered female wits who displayed their talents in public their vanity aroused her distaste. However gifted these women might be, she thought, men always tended to ridicule them. On no account therefore must a woman be seen to perform or write for the public, she agreed with Rousseau—at least until circumstances were to force her hand.

It was through Sophie in Amiens that Jean-Marie Roland came to call with a letter of introduction when he visited Paris in 1776. Known as a liberal-minded advocate of free trade, he was the hard-working official inspector of manufactures in Picardy, whose headquarters were in Amiens. A bachelor past forty, he had travelled widely in Europe and he was acquainted with eminent savants. She could discuss literature, philosophy, and politics with him as her friend and guide. He might be domineering, but he also appeared "austere," high-principled, a cultivated man of integrity. "I believed I saw that as regards politics and conduct he held true principles," wrote Manon to Sophie, thus revealing her own priorities as a young woman of twenty-two.

There followed an odd on-off courtship. It lasted several years, until she brought him to his knees by retiring to the convent where she had been educated. Roland came from land-owning gentry in the Lyons region, his social position was therefore higher than hers, and his family saw their union as a misalliance. Nonetheless, they were married in 1780. Their daughter Eudora (who in character and talent was to prove such a great disappointment to her mother) was born in 1781. Indeed, after Eudora's failure to live up to Manon's high standards, the girl was kept in the background. Manon liked to refer to her husband as Cato, with herself as Cato's wife, but this may have been slightly ironical, and not quite the Roman compliment it might first appear. For, in a letter to Sophie where she had discussed Cicero's letters to Atticus, she had observed that Cicero thought Cato a true citizen but stiff and with little tact. She was to feel the same about her husband. It appeared to her that he made enemies by his sharp and sarcastic manner, and that he lacked the ability to "dissect" the motives of others as well as being wanting in finesse in dealing with them. She herself had to make up for these shortcomings by her grace and charm. Did she realize, when she wrote her memoirs to establish his reputation and her own in the eyes of posterity, how unprepossessing a portrait she was painting of her husband's character? Perhaps she did.

From the beginning of their life together, Manon served as unofficial secretary to her husband, helping him with his writings, including the three volumes of his important Dictionary of Manufactures, Arts, and Trades, part of the additions to the celebrated *Encyclopédie* edited by Diderot and d'Alembert. Her powers of concentration and her literary skills were considerable, and, as she later expressed it, Roland began to think he had written her more stylish contributions himself. It was she who often corresponded with friends he had made like Jacques-Pierre Brissot who was to become the revolutionary leader of the Girondins. After all, she had had long practice in her years of letter writing. Besides, she had once sketched a metaphysical dissertation, planned a philosophical novel, and been persuaded to submit an essay on women's education to a provincial academy—anonymously, of course. She had even written a lively account of a journey into the country in disguise as her cousin's maid, and had fantasized about the advantages of travelling in men's clothes.

Through her husband's connections in the worlds of learning, commerce, law, and politics, her horizons began to expand. For the first time, she visited England, meeting the naturalist Sir Joseph Banks, and noting

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"the happy results" of the English constitution that she had admired when reading Delolme. In Switzerland, she became acquainted with the philosopher-poet Johann Kaspar Lavater, celebrated analyst of physiognomy, and she corresponded with him. As was perfectly customary in the ancien régime, where women were often employed to use their charms to seek advancement for male members of the family, Roland sent his wife to Versailles to try to obtain a patent of nobility. She did not succeed, but she did obtain his promotion to Lyons.

It was not the first time that she had visited the palace at Versailles. She had been taken there once on an excursion with her mother, staying briefly in a borrowed apartment in the attics, next door to the Archbishop of Paris, no less. She remembered the vile stench from the privy on the floor they shared with this strict cleric who like the rest was prepared to live in squalor so as to be able to "crawl" before the high and mighty. She told her mother that she felt nothing but "hatred" for the members of the court with their haughty airs, and she raged at the sheer injustice and absurdity of it all. Any example of pretentious mediocrity—and she encountered many—invited her scorn for privileges that were not founded on merit. Together with her sense of her own worth and her high idealistic principles, it was indignation and resentment that would play a large part in firing Manon's revolutionary ardor.

In Lyons, Roland aroused the wrath of the local reactionaries by his enthusiasm for change—enthusiasm passionately shared by his wife, who was much moved by the appalling sufferings of the poor in the Lyons region during the recession of the 1780s. Her letters to friends like Louis-Augustin-Guillaume Bosc, for instance, reveal her frustration at what was going on in Paris, known to her only at second hand. Nothing fulfilled her dream of action as it should be. Her language became ever more intransigent. "You are nothing but children," she wrote to Bosc, shortly after the fall of the Bastille. "Your enthusiasm is a flash in the pan, and if the National Assembly does not put on trial two illustrious heads, or if some magnanimous Decius does not slay them, you are all f*****." This note of forceful vulgarity in a person so sensitive to womanly charm and grace takes one by surprise.

In her correspondence the tone of redemptive violence grows ever more strident. In order to "whip" one's fellow citizens into action, what is needed is for them to prove their mettle in a civil war. It is impossible to rise to liberty from corruption without dangerous upheavals. These are simply the "salutary crises" of a grave political fever. This dark vision was inspired perhaps not only by internecine conflicts in ancient Rome but also by the civil strife in seventeenth-century England that gave birth to Cromwell's republic. Apart from preaching and teaching, one must inspire fear. Patriotic writers should denounce corrupt political figures, advice later to be followed assiduously (and with little regard for truth) by her enemies. Complete your work or be ready to water it with your blood, she proclaimed. "When the public safety is at stake the citizen should not even spare his father." Brissot published some of her outpourings in *Le Patriote Français* as "Letters from a Roman Lady."

When Roland was sent to Paris early in 1791 to try to settle the debts of the Lyons municipality, of which he was a member, Manon accompanied him. She hastened to attend sessions of the Constituent Assembly, but she became so angry that she could not bear to return. In her impatience it seemed to her that everything was moving much too slowly. Four times a week, in her salon, Brissot and his associates and Robespierre (whom she then admired) were frugally entertained. She sat sewing or writing letters, listening intently, absorbing all, and remembering the fine details, but she did not join in the discussions. Sometimes, she related, she had to bite her tongue.

With Roland's financial mission successfully concluded, the couple returned home

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to the provinces. A few months later, they were back in Paris, no longer quite so much in demand as before. Thoroughly depressed, Manon was contemplating defeat when, to general surprise, Roland was appointed Minister of the Interior. An eyewitness has described how Manon was suddenly transfigured. For this unexpected appointment (due to the constitutional exclusion of deputies who had already served) Roland was largely indebted to Brissot and his friends. In Manon's view, Brissot remained the true patriot. She appears to have known nothing about his period of gutter journalism or his shady past as a police spy (corroborated by Robert Darnton's fascinating researches into the eighteenth-century literary underground). Nor did she seem aware of Brissot's former close links to the Orléans party, or the fact that his wife was a protégée of Mme de Genlis, whom Manon thoroughly detested. The historian Pierre-Edouard Lemontey, who knew Manon at this period, remarked that she spoke of nothing but political affairs. She informed him—in a way that now seems profoundly ironic—that she was ready to die on the scaffold. He said that she seemed to pity his moderation.

In the splendid official residence, Manon gave modest dinners twice a week, attended mostly by political allies. Her comments on the best part of the Girondins were tart. Eloquent lawyers as many of them were, they were incapable of action, they lacked character, and moreover they were "lazy." As for the liberal *philosophe* Condorcet, however estimable, he should never have left his study. Gaspard Monge in ministerial debates had never occupied anything but his chair. She met Thomas Paine whose writings she thought were preferable to the man in person. The revolutionary leaders who would be idolized as role models down the ages were all, in her view, "pygmies." No women were ever present at these dinners—she did not have a high opinion of their sense or discretion. Many people who sought access to Roland approached her first. It was she who, as unofficial secretary (and private adviser) to Roland, wrote the celebrated letter to Louis XVI, where she told the king some home truths in her husband's name. Such was the power of the social conventions of the day that she had to maintain the fiction that she had never crossed the limits imposed on her sex. Consequently she lied in her memoirs when she declared that she had simply copied the notorious missive. In a situation increasingly compromising for the Girondins, her action was decisive. Unsurprisingly, Roland was dismissed together with the other two Girondin ministers.

The "second revolution," the popular insurrection of August 10, 1792, brought Danton to power as Minister of Justice, while restoring Roland to his post. But the scene had changed radically. Manon could not abide Danton, with his large appetites and his questionable financial dealings. Some have suggested that her hostility to him carried a sexual undertone, others that she simply resented the way he ineluctably cast her husband into the shade. Certainly, her refusal to consider any accommodation with Danton when he contemplated an alliance with the Girondins was not politic. She attributed to him and his faction (wrongly, historians believe) the responsibility for the ghastly massacres of September 1792. Onetime advocate of spilling blood, Manon viewed this savagery with horror. It was one thing to urge bloodletting in rhetoric and another to have to face the grisly reality. However, the fact was that Roland himself along with the rest of the Girondins had failed to act decisively to prevent such an atrocity, though she did not admit it. They were now left behind as ever more ruthless figures took command. Both Roland and his wife came under fierce attack from demagogues like Marat.

Manon had always been eager to teach and, privately, Roland appears to have left her in charge of the *Bureau d'Esprit Public*, a sort of propaganda office for educating the people in the proper revolutionary principles. "You do not have to be a profound

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politician to know that public opinion creates the strength of governments," wrote Manon, asserting that here lay the difference between a just government and tyranny. All the same, amid the fear and suspicion fostered by enemy invasion, it was easy to suggest that this *Bureau* concealed a source of sedition—yet another conspiracy theory to which could be added the calumnies and the obscene innuendoes of the demagogues. Roland himself was castigated and his integrity impugned because of his serious tactical error in opening the king's private "iron safe" without first obtaining due authorization from his colleagues. On January 22, 1793, the very day after Louis XVI died by the guillotine, Roland submitted a letter of resignation. This was actually written by his wife. Her activity, it seems, was no secret. In the Convention, Danton remarked sarcastically that any proposal made to Roland should be put to Mme Roland as well, "for everyone knows that Roland is not alone in his ministerial office."

Husband and wife were soon in serious danger in a world that came to seem to her far worse than that of the ancien régime. Robespierre had embarked on removing all those who stood in his way. With the fall of the Girondins, Roland went into hiding. Why did she not go with him? Was it because grave differences had arisen between the couple? Toward the end of the previous year, Manon had fallen in love with a member of her political circle. This was the Norman-born lawyer François Buzot, already married, who shared her melancholy temperament and her lofty Roman principles. She had flirted with admirers on occasion, but this was romantic passion in the grand manner. They sublimated their love, she insisted in her memoirs, declaring that it never overstepped "the bounds of virtue." Intoxicated by literature and in accord with the religion of feeling, she had confessed to her husband, following Mme de Lafayette's heroine the Princesse de Clèves and Rousseau's Julie. This was a serious misjudgment on the part of one who prided herself on her psychological acumen. Roland did not behave like a husband in a romantic novel with noble sorrow or compassionate understanding and sympathy. He became bitter and resentful. She had to persuade him to destroy his vengeful memoirs so as not to damage their own image in the eyes of posterity.

Manon was arrested at the same time as the Girondin leaders on May 31, 1793, and she spent some five months in prison. According to eyewitnesses, she behaved with exemplary courage. She showed herself a paragon of domesticity, cleaning her cell and keeping it habitable. She cared for her fellow prisoners. She kept busy with drawing, reading, and composing in haste the memoirs that were to be her "moral and political testament." To faithful friends who came to visit her, she managed to entrust portions of the manuscript for safekeeping. One, however, fearing immediate discovery, burned the pages in his possession. She was so shattered that she said she wished she had been consigned to the flames with them.

In prison, paradoxically, she felt for a while strangely content and free—free to think about her beloved Buzot in a way that Stendhal possibly recalled when having Fabrice, imprisoned in the tower, dream happily of Clélia in *La Chartreuse de Parme.* Meanwhile, through her friends, she was able to correspond with Buzot who was trying to raise an army in Normandy to march on Paris. When her correspondence with the rebels became known, it was enough to seal her fate. With Girondin allies, she was a federalist after the American model, at a time when Robespierre stood for France "*une et indivisible.*" Her high hopes for the insurrection in Normandy were not fulfilled. To her despair, in defeat Buzot and his companions fled to Bordeaux instead of to the United States, as she had urged. She contemplated suicide in the high Roman fashion—her husband would later take his own life and so would Buzot—but she decided instead to die with the rest of the Girondin leaders.

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She was not permitted to speak at her "trial" on November 8, 1793 and she was hurried to the guillotine on the very same day. Courageous to the last, she had also contrived to arrange her final moments with the skill of a consummate actress. For she aimed to be remembered along with her favorite models of integrity, men wrongfully condemned to death, from Socrates to the seventeenth-century English republican Algernon Sidney. A good friend of hers, Sophie Grandchamp, acceded to her request and stood at a prearranged spot so that she could bear witness to Manon's steadfast and heroic demeanor in the tumbrel on the way to the guillotine. Manon had been ready in imagination to die on the scaffold, and here she was, her destiny fulfilled, a martyr to the revolution that devoured its children.

What was her role? Is it possible now to separate it from that of her husband, without whom presumably she would have played no part? Was it she who persuaded Roland to return to Paris in 1791, thus placing him at the center of affairs, making him available for high office, and ultimately by her actions causing his destruction? Would Roland himself have entered the historical stage if she had not propelled him? In her memoirs she speaks of their collaboration, while insisting that Roland did not need her to make his mark. Yet it is plain that she was more than a secretary or a mere copyist, as she pretended. Together they discussed matters of state. She was his adviser and confidante. She had ideas that he adopted as his own. Hers was the energy, drive, and ambition. And it is she (rather than her husband) whom historians and novelists have endowed with the heroic role. Given the years she had devoted to the study of history and politics, she felt that she was better equipped intellectually and morally than many of the political leaders of her day. She paid a heavy price for her vanity and her passionate urge to "regenerate" her fellow citizens, who—in the manner of humankind—were singularly reluctant to be regenerated.

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A universal region: the fiction of Eudora Welty

by Brooke Allen

"As you have seen," wrote Eudora Welty in the final paragraph of her memoir, *One Writer's Beginnings* (1984), "I am a writer who came of a sheltered life. A sheltered life can be a daring life as well. For all serious daring starts from within." Her choice of the word "daring" is an interesting one, for on looking back at her long career it is daring, above all, that turns out to have been the outstanding trait of this quiet Mississippi lady whose extra-literary life has been, in the normal sense of the word, neither daring nor adventurous. Born in 1909 in Jackson, Mississippi, the much-loved eldest child of an affectionate, cultivated, middle-class family, she has, except for a few years at the University of Wisconsin and at the Columbia University Business School in New York, lived in Mississippi all her life. Today, at the age of ninety, she still resides in the family home built by her father in the 1920s.[1]

But in the practice of her art, Welty has been as stylistically daring as any American of this century. Possibly more so, for even the great innovators like Hemingway and Faulkner, once they found "their" voices, refined and developed them rather than sailing off again into entirely uncharted territory as Welty did. Having perfected an entirely individual type of verbal farce with her early stories "Petrified Man" and "Why I Live at the P.O." (still her best-known and most frequently anthologized work, if not her best), she was simultaneously producing tales in a manner that can loosely be called Southern Gothic. As she matured she turned away from both genres in favor of a complex, layered style that allowed her to synthesize her many gifts.

Not all of her attempts, of course, have been successful; indeed they have included a few really spectacular failures. Some of the early experiments in the Gothic mode, such as "Asphodel," "The Purple Hat," and "Clytie," are downright bad, relying as they do on a puerile faith in the power of the grotesque *qua* grotesque. Many of these and the other early stories that make up the volumes *A Curtain of Green* (1941) and *The Wide Net* (1943), while they remain popular and critically respected, do not have the sustained mastery of the particular that marks Welty's best work; their narratives tend to buzz around the story's essence impotently, unable to capture it and making do instead with mere hyperbole, here as always a makeshift and inadequate tool.

But for all the flops and near misses in these volumes, there are at least an equal number of quite brilliant pieces and even a few that can confidently be called great. "Petrified Man," a series of conversations in a Southern beauty parlor over the course of several days, contains dialogue that is, to

1 The collected works of Eudora Welty were recently published in two volumes by the Library of America: *Complete Novels* (1012 pages, $35) and *Stories, Essays & Memoir* (980 pages, $28)

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use a degraded word literally, inimitable. Take the following exchange between Leota, the beautician, and her regular customer Mrs. Fletcher about Leota's new boarder, Mrs. Pike:

> She flicked an ash into the basket of dirty towels. "Mrs. Pike is a very decided blonde. *She* bought me the peanuts."
>
> "She must be cute," said Mrs. Fletcher.
>
> "Honey, 'cute' ain't the word for what she is. I'm tellin' you, Mrs. Pike is attractive. She has her a good time. She's got a sharp eye out, Mrs. Pike has."

How much we know about the awful Mrs. Pike after just these few words! How much we can deduce about her meager and inadequate soul! "Petrified Man" shows a perfectly pitched comic sense, and a surprising confidence and command of the language for so young a writer.

If "Petrified Man" shows one side of Welty's talent, the sombre and poetic "Livvie" shows another. Livvie, a young black woman, has been married to old Solomon since she was sixteen, imprisoned in his isolated cabin while he slowly lapses into feeble senility. The story shows the moment of her liberation and awakening as a strange young man appears and gives her love, life, the world. Here is a moment in the development of what were to become, over the course of Welty's career, really extraordinary descriptive gifts:

> Her hand took the lipstick, and in an instant she was carried away in the air through the spring, and looking down with a half-drowsy smile from a purple cloud she saw from above a chinaberry tree, dark and smooth and neatly leaved, neat as a guinea hen in the dooryard, and there was her home that she had left. On one side of the tree was her mama holding up her heavy apron, and she could see it was loaded with ripe figs, and on the other side was her papa holding a fish-pole over the pond, and she could see it transparently, the little clear fishes swimming up to the brim.

Both the sensuality and the odd note of fantasy—the chinaberry tree "neat as a guinea hen"—would continue as central elements of Welty's fiction, developed from stories like "Livvie," which works, and "A Curtain of Green," which oddly misses its mark, into the richer and riper loam of the subsequent stories that make up *The Golden Apples* (1949) and *The Bride of the Innisfallen* (1955). In "Ladies in Spring," we see the same qualities carried to an almost Dylan Thomas-esque pitch:

> After the bus put him down, he ran cutting across under the charred pines. The big sky-blue violets his mother loved were blooming, wet as cheeks. Pear trees were all but in bloom under the purple sky. Branches were being jogged with the rush and commotion of birds. The Cokers' patch of mustard that had gone to seed shone like gold from here. Dewey ran under the last drops, through the hooraying mud of the pasture, and saw the corrugations of their roof shining across it like a fresh pan of cornbread sticks.

As a rough generalization, it could be said that in her early work Welty tended to keep genres separate—Gothic, comic, and serious, descriptive stories—and that as she matured she united the different strands in a single, complex whole. *Delta Wedding* (1946), her second novel, demonstrates the development. While the novel as a whole shows a clear debt to Virginia Woolf, particularly the Woolf of *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*, there are individual elements that are uniquely Weltian. *Delta Wedding* is the group portrait of a large extended family, the Fairchilds, prosperous landowners long established in the Mississippi Delta. The occasion for the clan's gathering is the wedding of sixteen-year-old Dabney Fairchild to Troy Flavin, the overseer: enough of a mésalliance to inject some bracing discomfort into the proceedings, but not enough to cause anyone real misery. The narrative is an exercise in point of view, rather like *The Waves*. The bride herself; her more introverted elder sister, Shelley; her mother, Ellen, the quiet

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matriarch; her father; the beloved Uncle George; Troy; their little cousin Laura, visiting from Jackson: each adds his or her own wave to the narrative flow.

Not all the characters are particularly memorable, but the presence of a few fresh and rudely alive ones marks *Delta Wedding* as a work no one but Welty could have produced. There is the bossy old Dr. Murdoch, for example, an instantly recognizable small-town character (he made his appearance under a different name in "The Wide Net"). Better yet is the Fairchilds' regal Aunt Tempe, who upon arrival looks "quickly around the parlor, as though to catch it before it could compose itself" and offers her cheek to be kissed "in a temporary manner like a very expensive possession." "'The overseer,'" she announces, "nodding as if to imaginary people on both sides of the room, the tiniest smile on her face."

The scene in the parlor with Aunt Tempe and the rest of the family is comedy of the highest order, on a par with other great set pieces in Welty's fiction like Judge McKelva's funeral in *The Optimist's Daughter* or the near-drowning in *The Golden Apples*. It is in the smooth combination of the absurd with the lyrical and even the tragic that Welty, when she succeeds, does so most stunningly. The story "Kin," from *The Bride of the Innisfallen*, displays this delicate combination to great advantage. Dicey, a young woman who left Mississippi with her parents at the age of eight, is back visiting her Aunt Ethel and her cousins; her cousin Kate is her particular friend. Kate and Dicey, Aunt Ethel forcefully suggests, should go to Mingo—the "home place," the old family house—to visit their ancient Uncle Felix and "Sister Anne." Exactly how, they ask, is Sister Anne related to them?

> Aunt Edith looked patiently upwards as if she read now from the roof of the tester, and said, "Well, she's a remote cousin of Uncle Felix's, to begin with. Your third cousin twice removed, and your Great-aunt Beck's half-sister, my third cousin once removed and my aunt's half-sister, Dicey's—"
>
> "Don't tell me!" I cried. "I'm not that anxious to claim kin!"
>
> "She'll claim you! She'll come visit you!" cried Kate.

Sister Anne, it transpires, is vaguely distasteful to Aunt Edith and her children, for the simple reason that they consider her common—although by the unspoken laws of their own class it would be *lèse majesté* to own to such snobbish distinctions. They scorn her pretensions—her writing to them, for instance, on a gilt-edged card—and they cannot resist probing her sensitive spots:

> Uncle Felix's side and back loomed from a featherbed, on an old black iron frame of a bedstead, which tilted downwards toward the foot with the sinking of the whole house from the brow of the hill toward the back. . . .
>
> "That's a nigger bed," said Kate, in one tone, one word. I turned and looked straight into her eyes.
>
> "*It—is—not*," said Sister Anne. Her whole face shook, as if Kate could have made it collapse. Then she bowed her head toward us—that we could go on, now, if that was the spirit we had come in.

All this is rich in the sharp, occasionally cruel humor of which Welty is a past master. But the story is much more than that: aside from being, like so much of Welty's work, a reflection on the comforts and claustrophobia of community, it is also a tale of memory, change, and loss. Behind the present, rather degraded Mingo, Dicey can remember the "real" house, and the "real" Uncle Felix, of her childhood, and it is the extremely skillful combination of past and present that is the story's central achievement.

Welty is the author of five novels: *The Robber Bridegroom* (1942)—which is actually more fable than novel—*Delta Wedding* (1946), *The Ponder Heart* (1954), *Losing Battles* (1970) and *The Optimist's Daughter* (1972, first published in a different form in *The New Yorker* in 1969). Their quality is as

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uneven as that of the short stories; in fact only the first and most of all the last—an exquisite, almost perfect work—are really satisfactory *as* novels. *The Robber Bridegroom*, a playful historical romance of the Old Natchez Trace in the eighteenth century, combines folk elements, fairy tales, history, tall tales, and the ideal of Arcadia. It has had its share of passionate admirers including, most notably, Alfred Kazin; it has also had its detractors, the most persuasive being Lionel Trilling. Reviewing the book in *The Nation* upon its publication in 1942, Trilling put the narrative's easy charm in its place: its "lucidity," he wrote, "its grace, and its simplicity have a quality that invalidates them all—they are too conscious, especially the simplicity, and nothing can be falser, more purple and 'literary' than conscious simplicity." And how often, to be honest, do children's stories for adults really succeed? It is one of the hardest tones to strike, one of the hardest genres to pull off.

The Ponder Heart is another children's story for adults, more successful than *The Robber Bridegroom*: funnier, less fanciful, heightened at every moment by Welty's brilliant ear for language and idiosyncratic turns of speech; but still a little too conscious, too artificial, to amount to more than a *jeu d'esprit*. Uncle Daniel Ponder, the novel's ostensible focus, is a retarded gentleman, although true to the mores of his community the word "retarded" is never used, least of all by the narrator, the sensible Miss Edna Earle Ponder. (Circumlocution and gentle euphemism are characteristic of the culture to which Welty belongs and which she portrays so acutely. In her charming memoir *One Writer's Beginnings*, she recalls of her own mother that "she never in her life called anyone a fool, though she never bore one gladly, but she *would* say, 'Well, it appears to me that Mrs. So-and-So is the least bit *limited*.'") The action of *The Ponder Heart* centers around Uncle Daniel's marriage to a trashy girl, Bonnie Dee Peacock, and its inevitably disastrous outcome. It is all funny, smart, and technically accomplished, but the result is merely a comic tale rather than a novel—not, I think, that Welty ever meant it to be anything more.

Even for what it is *The Ponder Heart* is marred by two weaknesses to which Welty was not, alas, immune: sentimentality and, worse, cuteness. In an unpretentious squib like *The Ponder Heart*, these flaws detract from the whole but need not ruin it. In work that pretends to high seriousness, though, they are fatal, as was the case with *Losing Battles*, the longest and most ambitious of Welty's novels. It was greeted with excessive praise when published, probably because of its length, scope, and the fact that Welty had not published a book in fifteen years. There was much ooh-ing and aah-ing over a book that is at best mediocre, at worst both self-indulgent and self-congratulatory: Reynolds Price, for instance, deemed it "an almost frightening gift . . . of such plenitude and serene mastery as to reveal with panicking suddenness how thin a diet we have survived on."

Welty must have set too much store by her own reputation as a master of dialogue and idiom, for nearly all of this lengthy book is in the form of an extended conversation as three generations of a Mississippi hill family exchange stories and reveal, in their collective manner, the patterns and cycles of their lives. But the dialogue is disgustingly folksy and conscious; none of the many voices can be differentiated from one another; the themes are obvious and uninteresting. Worse, the narrative has a smug confidence in the virtue of its own statements and values that neutralizes the work's integrity. *Losing Battles* was nominated for a National Book Award and received almost unanimous accolades; in the long run it will turn out, I believe, to be the least regarded of her books.

The Optimist's Daughter is the most adult of Welty's novels, and also the most disciplined. A remarkably skillful interweaving of biographical with fictional material, this short but potent book carries great emotional weight. Laurel McKelva Hand, a forty-five-year-old widow who has long

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lived in Chicago, goes to New Orleans to be with her father as he undergoes an unpleasant eye operation. Laurel's mother has been dead for several years, and Judge McKelva has recently remarried a vulgar, stupid younger woman, Fay—a less cartoonish, although more vicious, version of Bonnie Dee Peacock in *The Ponder Heart*. Judge McKelva does not recover properly after his surgery; instead he sinks into an inexplicable decline and finally dies. The two women take the body back and return to the home that for Laurel is full of memories of her mother and father but to which Fay no longer welcomes her. Friends and neighbors visit and mourn; the funeral is organized and got through with only minor disasters; and Laurel prepares to leave the house forever, taking final leave not only of her parents but also of the young husband whose death, twenty years earlier, she had never come to terms with.

If Eudora Welty has not generally been accepted as one of the century's heavyweights, it is probably because she has been thought too regional and too feminine. Are these charges justified? Femininity, in a Southern writer, might actually be something of an advantage, since Southern society—at least among the middle and upper classes—is a matriarchal one, as Welty always recognized. Beginning with one of her first published stories, "Lily Daw and the Three Ladies" (1937), it is clearly the women who run things. In towns it is the monolithic and not-to-be-defied "ladies" that rule. In plantation life the same still holds, but the dynamic is different, as one of the characters in *Delta Wedding* reflects:

> In the Delta the land belonged to the women—they only let the men have it, and sometimes they tried to take it back and give it to someone else. . . . All the men lived here on a kind of sufferance! . . . It was as if the women had exacted the place, the land, for something—for something they had had to give. Then, so as to be all gracious and noble, they had let it out of their hands—with a play of the reins—to the men. . . . And of course those women knew what to ask of their men. Adoration, first—but least. Then, small sacrifice by small sacrifice, the little pieces of the whole body!

I think it can be said then that yes, Welty is a feminine writer; but it has yet to be demonstrated that this quality puts her at any particular disadvantage with her chosen material. To the taunt of regionalism, however, she was distinctly sensitive, and she addressed it with spirit in a 1956 essay entitled "Place in Fiction":

> It is by the nature of itself that fiction is all bound up in the local. The internal reason for that is surely that *feelings* are bound up in place. The human mind is a mass of associations—associations more poetic even than actual. I say, "The Yorkshire Moors," and you will say, *Wuthering Heights*, and I have only to murmur "If Father were only alive—" for you to come back with "We could go to Moscow," which certainly is not even so. . . . Location pertains to feeling; feeling profoundly pertains to place; place in history partakes of feeling, as feeling about history partakes of place. Every story would be another story, and unrecognizable as art, if it took up its characters and plot and happened somewhere else. Imagine *Swann's Way* laid in London, or *The Magic Mountain* in Spain, or *Green Mansions* in the Black Forest. . . . Jane Austen, Emily Bronte, Thomas Hardy, Cervantes, Turgenev, the authors of the books of the Old Testament, all confined themselves to regions, great or small, but are they regional? Then who from the start of time has not been so?

It must be admitted that she has a point; for myself, I find Welty no more or less a regionalist than William Faulkner, Philip Roth, or Evan S. Connell: that is to say, they are all regionalists, but that quality can hardly be considered their most important. Being accused of mere regionalism is the price Welty has had to pay for the exquisite skill with which she so frequently has caught the essence of the South: its beauty

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and ugliness, its charm, whether shallow or true, its narcissistic smirk, its spoken and unspoken hatreds, its "Southern look—Southern mask—of life-is-a-dream irony."

Welty's mother came from the West Virginia mountains, her father from an Ohio farm. She was always, then, something of an outsider in the Deep South of which she became one of the foremost observers; the slight distance between her own vantage point and the landscape she depicted might well have contributed to the fine sharpness of her focus. Distance was, indeed, a necessary technique of which she was highly aware. During the Depression she worked as a photographer for the Works Progress Administration, traveling through Mississippi to record the lives of local people. As she began writing fiction she consciously applied the photographic techniques of distancing and framing to her stories.

When her parents married in 1904 they decided to make their home somewhere unknown to them both. After some research into the matter, Christian Welty presented his wife with a choice between the Thousand Islands region and Jackson, Mississippi; Chestina chose Jackson. What sort of a writer (for she surely would have been a writer no matter what) might Eudora Welty have become if her mother had made the other choice? Would we now consider her a regional novelist of the North Country? What aspects of that region might she best have captured on the page?

If Welty is a specifically Southern writer, she is one not so much in her flair for character, place, or incident as in her peculiarly Southern obsession with family and community. All of Welty's best fiction deals on some level with these tortured subjects, as does that of so many Southern writers—*North Toward Home*, by Welty's fellow-Mississippian Willie Morris, can be seen as especially pertinent to her work.

There is more tolerance, in the Southern communities of which Welty writes, for eccentricity, stupidity, drunkenness, want of ambition, and general weirdness than exists elsewhere in America. The tolerance is extended only, however, on condition of a certain measure of surrender to the community, a surrender that amounts merely to a willingness to be measured and defined by that community's standards. Thus in the town of Morgana, the setting for all the stories that make up *The Golden Apples*, the German piano teacher Miss Eckhart is forever a foreigner, more out of her own choice than the town's.

> Missie Spights said that if Miss Eckhart had allowed herself to be called by her first name, then she would have been like other ladies. Or if Miss Eckhart had belonged to a church that had ever been heard of, and the ladies would have had something to invite her to belong to. . . . Or if she had been married to anybody at all, just the awfullest man—like Miss Snowdie MacLain, that everybody could feel sorry for.

Morgana didn't ask so very much of its citizens, after all: "They only hoped to place them, in their hour or their street or the name of their mothers' people. Then Morgana could hold them, and at last they were this and they were that."

This is a price that most people, in the end, are willing to pay for the privilege of belonging. But what of those who refuse to pay it and, like Kipling's cat, choose instead to walk by themselves? In *The Golden Apples* there is one such character, Virgie Rainey. A Morgana insider by birth, she has a musical gift that sets her apart from her fellows. But she resists any role the town might try to cast her in, just as she resists the ambitions treasured for her by Miss Eckhart, who in Virgie has found a justification for her own vocation as a teacher. Virgie's strength is in her resistance. And after all,

> They had all known Virgie would never go, or study, or practice anywhere, never would even have her own piano, because it wouldn't be like her. . . . Perhaps nobody wanted Virgie Rainey to be anything in Morgana any more than they had wanted Miss Eckhart to be, and

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they were the two of them still linked by people's saying that.

What Virgie earns from her heroic stand is something more valuable, to her, than a musical career or even a sense of belonging; it is a simple acknowledgement of her as different, as an individual, as someone who cannot be held and labeled by the town.

Laurel Hand in *The Optimist's Daughter* is a gentler soul than Virgie, and makes her break from her home town of Mount Salus in a gentler way. Nevertheless, it is a break. Married and widowed young, living in Chicago and working as a fabric designer for the past twenty years, she still thinks, to a large degree, of Mount Salus at home. After her father's funeral she slips effortlessly back into her place among the ladies of the town. They, too, feel that she is home, and urge her to move back to Mount Salus.

"Why not indeed?" said Miss Adele. "Laurel has no other life."

"Of course I must get back to work," said Laurel.

"Back to work." Miss Tennyson pointed her finger at Laurel and told the others, "That girl's had more now than she can say grace over. And she's going back to that life of labor when she could just as easily give it up. Clint's left her a grand hunk of money."

"Once you leave after this, you'll always come back as a visitor," Mrs. Pease warned Laurel. "Feel free, of course, but it was always my opinion that people don't really want visitors."

The ladies' blithe assumption that Laurel has no other life, their manner of implying, throughout Laurel's time in Mount Salus, that what goes on outside of their town is somehow fictional and certainly not of much account, is infuriating, yet it also defines the security and sanctuary such a community provides. Laurel leaves; Welty herself, of course, stayed on in Jackson.

Robert Penn Warren once identified Welty's twin themes, correctly I think, as love and separateness. Love in her work, though, can be very broadly defined, and, as Edna Earle states in *The Ponder Heart*, "There's something I think's better to have than love, and if you want me to, I'll tell you what it is—that's company." The demands of the individual against the demands of the group: it is a particularly Southern theme, and perhaps a particularly feminine one as well. But the truth is that everyone, in every culture, is prey to these conflicting demands. Welty, who has depicted them with such intelligence, has more than earned her place as not just a regional but a universal artist.

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Poems
by Ben Downing & Paul Kane

The New Parnassians

for Herb Leibowitz

That this is the way it's always been done—
the old devolving to the callow young

the gold of their experience, the green
gleaning off the seasoned their maturity—

subtracts but little from my debt to you.
My burden grows, in fact, because so few

now trouble to pass on, without reward,
the living knowledge they inherited.

And culture too, and history, are deep
in hock to those who make tomorrow keep

alive the verities of yesterday.
Such patrons are deserving of a place,

a peak, beside the muses they abet—
they who teach us what we'd otherwise forget.

—Ben Downing

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The Civil Wars

Of all the insurrections that the day
attempts to marshal into something like
a commonwealth, which of them—the quick
euphorias, the brave rushes giving way

so cravenly again to lassitude,
and that, in turn, to dread or fretfulness
(routed later by resurgent bliss)—
is final sovereign of the fractious moods?

Change, you are the savage general and the peace
most missed in times of stalemate; from each
debacle there's a transient release,

a treaty hammered out between the sides
which, no sooner signed, is promptly breached,
leaving them lame, unled, and balkanized.

—*Ben Downing*

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Tempocide

I tried to kill time but it would not die.
No sooner had I whacked its weeds than they
sprang tauntingly back up, revivified
by some artesian strength inside the day.
Its past I stabbed, then laced with cyanide
the golden sundials for its greedy rays—
fiascoes both. My attempt, while driving by,
to catch the minutes in a fusillade
of disregard; my fiendish plot to elide
unwanted hours just dawdling them away;
the clock-shaped voodoo doll; the evil eye
against my watch; calendars auto-da-féed:
all these and others went risibly awry,
so botched and feeble were my ambuscades.
The more I hacked, in fact, the more time's hy-
dra heads came unwinding out to prey,
their long antagonisms multiplied
and whetted by such treacherous essays.
From tick to tock now seemed an ocean wide;
a googolplex of nanoseconds weighed
upon me crushingly. Helpless then to pry
loose time's awful bulk or to delay
its reckoning, nabbed without an alibi,
a sorry-ass sicarius *tout à fait*,
I wished I'd let time be and wondered why
we try to kill what passes anyway.

—*Ben Downing*

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Untitled

Rothko, no. 116, 1969

Flecks of white, like floaters in an inverse
eye or stars in the blacker sky of another
world, mark an inconsolable landscape that
all but consoled a dying man: pale foreground
stretching like a desert to the horizontal
line of night, the far edge of dream, and
beyond it the black we see when we close

our eyes. And the thin frame of white paint?
It opens up the vision, insists on the border
between us and what we behold: another horizon,
a perspective that leads to the vanishing point.

—*Paul Kane*

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London journal

Stunts & consequences

by John Gross

The culture wars proceed apace—or do they? To talk about fighting a war is in some respects a cheering metaphor; it presupposes at least the possibility of victory. But there are days when one feels that the whole thing is really over, and that all that is left are the mopping-up operations.

There was the recent gray dawn, for instance, when the government issued its latest decrees for the teaching of literature in schools. And here I must pause: the idea that it would have been issuing any decrees at all in such a field would have seemed so bizarre in the Britain of twenty or thirty years ago that it calls for an explanation.

Once upon a time the British prided themselves on having a school system which avoided heavy centralization and state control. In those days the question of which authors were taught in schools would have been largely decided by the schools themselves or by local examination boards, which often received guidance from universities. In 1988, however, the Thatcher government introduced the National Curriculum—in effect, a core curriculum which all schools would now be obliged to teach. The legislation had laudable motives: it was a clear response to declining standards, especially (under the influence of fashionable theorists) in the actual content of what was being taught. But even at the time it was pointed out there were two dangers. Firstly, the scheme was liable to be administered by the same educationists who had helped to bring about the crisis it was supposed to correct. Secondly, a subsequent government might take a very different view of what the contents of the curriculum ought to be. And so, in a number of major areas, it has proved—literature being one.

Most of the authors on the curriculum are simply "recommended": a school is free to choose from among them. Beginning with the current school year, however, the choice has been drastically redefined. Many major authors have been removed—among others, Dryden, Byron, Matthew Arnold, and Henry James. A particularly painful omission, for anyone who knows what he has meant to generations of English readers, is John Bunyan. But it is hard to contemplate the deletion of even a lesser figure like Thomas Gray without a pang, if it means that children are going to grow up without ever having heard of the "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard"—and where else are they likely to come across it nowadays if not at school?

It should be stressed that none of these authors *had* to be taught. Removing them was as much a cultural statement as a practical measure, the chief objection against them apparently being that they lived a long time ago. (Oddly enough, the revisers of the curriculum don't seem to have any qualms about offending feminists—they have also ejected some outstanding women writers, including Mrs. Gaskell and Christina Rossetti.)

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As for the newcomers, they are almost all modern; some are either American (Steinbeck, Robert Lowell) or from countries which were once part of the British Empire (Rabindranath Tagore, the Kenyan novelist Ngugi wa Thiongo) and a considerable number are playwrights. Byron and Arnold have moved over to make room for Arthur Miller and Peter Shaffer. Instead of George Herbert (another casualty), students can now read Maya Angelou or Arnold Wesker; instead of that wonderful poet John Clare, the amiable but somewhat less wonderful rural chronicles of Laurie Lee; instead of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Alan Ayckbourn or David Hare.

Things are even rougher over in the history department where the latest revisions of the curriculum, to be introduced next year, are intended to "reduce prescriptive detail." In practice this means that schools will no longer be obliged to teach their pupils about *any* specific personality or event in British history—no Battle of Hastings, no Magna Carta, no Henry VIII. For good measure—in order, we are told, to "increase flexibility"—there will no longer be any requirement to teach history in chronological sequence. Disraeli once said that his wife was "a dear creature, but she can never remember which came first, the Greeks or the Romans." She was clearly ahead of her time.

The details of the curriculum are drawn up by a body which has been dominated since the Blair government came to power by pundits with predictably "progressive" views. For instance, one of the advisers responsible for overseeing revisions of the English syllabus has announced that he thinks pupils should be "free to make their own cultural and literary affiliations." Another has proposed that this should be achieved by teaching English from football "fanzines." More resoundingly, the most prominent professor of education on the advisory board has said that he wants the curriculum to be "a multi-dimensional cyberspace."

The government's attitude to all this is somewhat ambiguous. Occasionally it distances itself from its advisers with a high-sounding statement about education still having a traditional role; mostly it goes along with their specific proposals. It does, however, appear to be committed to the curriculum's original Thatcherite goals when it comes to teaching basic literacy and numeracy; on the other hand it wouldn't be the Blair government if it hadn't also set up a "creative taskforce" and asked it for advice on how to counteract "the straitjacket effect" of the curriculum. This body, which consists of dancers, musicians, actors, academics, a comedian, and a fashion designer, has now come up with its recommendations; they include according a higher academic status to football and encouraging the study of alternative comedy.

Meanwhile, once-proud British institutions limp towards the Millennium—walking wounded, many of them, with few signs of imminent recovery. Among the various falls from institutional greatness, perhaps the saddest, if you take the long view, is that of the Church of England. The saddest and also at times, it has to be said, the most absurd; and nowhere is this absurdity more clearly embodied than in the person of the Most Reverend Robert Holloway, Bishop of Edinburgh.

Bishop Holloway is Primus or head of the Episcopal Church of Scotland, the Scottish sister of the Church of England. He is also a veteran campaigner for homosexual rights, but in a new book published this summer—*Godless Morality: Keeping Religion Out of Ethics*—he casts his net much wider, arguing for a more relaxed attitude towards sex in general and extramarital sex in particular. There may not necessarily be anything wrong, he suggests, in promiscuity.

This is an unusual point of view for a bishop, even a contemporary bishop, but it is not so much Bishop Holloway's opinions that are absurd as the tone in which he expresses them. He repeatedly uses the term "shagging" as though it were the only one which served his purpose; he urges us to

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accept with equanimity the fact that many young people "shag" whenever they feel like it, "the way they have a cup of coffee or a hamburger."

In some respects Bishop Holloway is a highly traditional Anglican figure, the comic clergyman. Many of his colleagues find him an embarrassment. But the fact remains that he is a senior member of the Anglican Communion (the Archbishop of Canterbury has declined to take issue with him); and if he is an eccentric, he has successfully adapted his eccentricities to the spirit of the age.

His book has in fact proved even more timely than he could have foreseen, coinciding as it has with the runaway success, on both sides of the Atlantic, of the film *The Spy Who Shagged Me*. That film has, I believe, served to introduce most Americans to the use of the word "shag" with a sexual connotation. In Britain it is an old word, an ugly word, and a word charged with a good deal of contempt—contempt for anyone who thinks sex could be more than a quick bit of gratification. The film's title, needless to say, parodies James Bond, and part of the joke is meant to be that it substitutes "shagged" for "loved." But then even without the Bond allusion, it is a title which perfectly captures the mood of guffawing "laddishness" which has been let loose all over British popular culture in recent years—the mood of that same alternative comedy which the prime minister's creative taskforce is eager for schools to study in depth.

Oh well, you Americans have your "South Park." (A school over here called South Park has just changed its name, incidentally, in order to avoid ribald confusion; it withstood "South Park" the television program, but the movie has proved too much for it.) We are dealing with international developments, in crudeness no less than in dumbing-down or political correctness, and in many of them America can justly claim to be setting the lead. A senior BBC executive recently announced, for instance, that in the field of comedy the corporation's ambition was to produce programs "which owe more to the Simpsons than to Ealing Comedies" (meaning such films as *Kind Hearts and Coronets* and *The Lavender Hill Mob*). But we still like to think that there is a particular brand of smuttiness which is all our own. Another senior BBC executive recently summed up the contents of a new comedy series, set in the court of Louis XVI, as "murder, scandal, and lots of rumpo involving mad aristocrats." *Rumpo*: it's a word which the Bishop of Edinburgh might well wish to file away for future use.

It's hard to attempt a final cultural balance sheet. For all the damage which it has sustained, Britain remains, on the whole, a pleasant and civilized place. But just when you think that life is really not too bad, and that one mustn't exaggerate the problems, along comes something else.

The government's latest initiative, which has only just been published, is a list of "great minds," nonfiction writers whom it wants every pupil in every secondary school in the country to study. I may return to it another time; for the moment, perhaps it is enough to say that it doesn't contain most of the names one might have expected—from Ruskin to Bertrand Russell, from Adam Smith to George Orwell—but that it does include, for example, Beatrice Webb and the Marxist art critic John Berger. No doubt, like so many Blair initiatives, it is primarily a stunt. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't take it seriously. Stunts, like genuine ideas, sometimes have consequences.

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Theater

Transatlantic notes

by Mark Steyn

"Celebrate Diversity," the bumper stickers advise, and one wishes one could. But, in a multicultural age, the enduring uniculturalism of the New York theater is a marvel to behold. In the American schoolroom, British novels, British poetry, British history have an ever-shrinking market share as teachers and school boards mandate more exotic pleasures by favored ethnic groups. But, on the American stage, the ultimate dead white guy's culture is more secure than ever. Old plays? They're British. New plays? They're British. Hip stars? Likewise: no American theater actor has the cachet in Manhattan of, say, Natasha Richardson (*Closer*) or Alan Cumming (*Cabaret*). Foreign stuff? Insofar as any ever washes up in New York, it's usually in British versions, from *Art* to *Les Parents Terribles* to *Les Miserables*. Token bits of multiculturalism? See how well all that critically admired African puppeteering in *The Lion King* would fare without the Elton John/Tim Rice score. Rodgers and Hammerstein? The only revivals worth seeing come from London's National Theatre—and, if you doubt me, compare the tatty homegrown productions of *The Sound of Music* and *State Fair* with Nicholas Hytner's *Carousel* and Trevor Nunn's *Oklahoma!* (due in New York shortly).

You can beef about this, as many in New York's theater community do, though not to any great effect. There's something to be said for theater as great art, there's something to be said for theater as a lucrative business. But there's nothing to be said for a theater which functions as neither—and that, alas, is the state to which the American stage has reduced itself, mainly through its own incompetence. As for those multiculturalists who moan about the obsessive Anglocentrism of American theater, let me offer a small consolation: it could be worse—what comes to New York is only the tip of the iceberg. To understand why London theater retains a vitality long since vanished from any other area of British endeavor, you're best to study it at the point of origin.

Take, for example, the Globe, the rebuilt open-air Elizabethan theatre which, admittedly, owes its existence to the fundraising efforts of an American, the late Sam Wanamaker. Its role is, in essence, to be a functioning Elizabethan theatre for (speaking monarchically) the second Elizabethan age. So, for example, Giles Block's production of *Antony and Cleopatra* is all-male, with the queen of the Nile played by Mark Rylance. This is one of those supposedly authentic touches which has the happy box-office benefit of imbuing the production with a contemporary frisson—in this instance, the "gay aesthetic," which, the style magazines assure us, has now crossed over into mainstream culture. This approach is confirmed by Rylance's queeny histrionics, which seem to owe more to Liz Taylor in her later fag-hag mode than in her Egyptian incarnation. And yet, that caveat aside, the

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bulk of the evening is not homoerotic in the least, but is as close to an Elizabethan theatrical experience as one could hope to find in 1999.

When the Globe opened, most of us assumed it would simply stage the same repertoire of its predecessor and namesake—the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. But then it emerged that the theater would also be commissioning new work. Hearing the news in Manhattan, I assumed they had in mind the same arrangement as the New York Shakespeare Festival: do the worthy old creakers but get *A Chorus Line* to pay for it all. But not so: the first commissioned new play has just opened, *Augustine's Oak* by Peter Oswald, written in verse and concerned with St. Augustine's visit to England in 597. As we left, I spoke to an American who'd assumed it was a period piece. When I corrected this misapprehension, he remarked offhandedly that he supposed, as a recreation of an old theater, the Globe was obliged to do plays appropriate to its period. A play about St. Augustine's mission to England is no more appropriate to the Elizabethan Globe than one about William the Conqueror would be to the Marriott Marquis on Broadway. But my friend was viewing the piece through the stunted perspective of the American theater's shrunken hinterland: a "classic" is something from the first half of the century; anything before that is off the graph. Yet somehow it never occurred to the fellows running the Globe that their audience would have a hard time "relating" to 597.

Augustine's Oak is a competent play in serviceable verse, but the one thing it isn't is hard to relate to. Augustine came to England to bring the Celtic Church in Wales under the control of Rome and to ally the Celts with the Anglo-Saxons against the pagan kingdom of Northumbria. In other words, the play's themes are the central questions in Britain today: English identity, control of the Celtic fringe, centralizing forces from Europe, and the relevance of an established church to a nation's spiritual health. Oswald does not belabor these parallels, and, unlike so many playwrights, declines to patronize the past. The result is not a great play, but one which manages to be true to the past in its own terms—especially on matters of faith—and yet seem vividly contemporary. Terry McGinty is a forceful Augustine and the director, Tim Carroll, makes full use of the Globe, both stage and auditorium. These were critical events in British history, and at a time when that sense of the past our grandparents took for granted has been all but obliterated by our present-tense culture—when so-called millennial retrospectives are exclusively preoccupied by Elvis and JFK—there's something heartening about a theatrical culture which takes in its stride events from a millennium-and-a-half ago.

What would be the American equivalent of a work which deals with the tensions between faith and state? You might try *Inherit the Wind*, a 1955 play by Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee (they later wrote the book for *Mame*) based on the famous 1920s trial of a Tennessee schoolmaster who taught his pupils about evolution. William Jennings Bryan prosecuted, Clarence Darrow defended, and, although the work is a slightly stodgy piece of old-fashioned playmaking and you're never in any doubt whose side Lawrence and Lee take, it's still an interesting perspective on the recent school board decision in Kansas. Which makes it all the more bizarre that a play on this theme should turn up not in the U.S., where the issue is as alive as ever, but in godless Britain, at the King's Head Theatre. Timothy Childs's production is impressively atmospheric (a difficult feat in a theatre where the stage seems little more than a cramped podium in the corner of an L-shaped room) and he has two very charismatic principals: George Sewell (Bryan) is a first-class scenery chewer, while Larry Lamb (Darrow) is rangy and contemplative. But the play's presence in Islington is most significant for the way it reminds us that, these days, London does a better job of project-

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ing the rich panoply of American life than the New York stage.

The conventional wisdom used to be that London's theatrical health was due to the great subsidized houses—the National and the RSC—acting as a radical counterweight to the middle-class boulevard theater of the West End. But a strange transformation has occurred in the last decade: it's the wild West End that's adventurous, unpredictable, dangerous, etc. and the National that's become the home of safe middle-class subscription theater (the RSC has retreated to Stratford and is no longer a presence on the London scene). When the National opened on the Thames's South Bank in 1976, the thinking was that the Victorian and Edwardian theaters on the other side of the river were cramped and uncomfortable with poor access: what the theater needed to thrive was a purpose-built complex with great parking facilities. As always with state interventions in the market, the law of unintended consequences kicked in: the vast parking lots around Sir Denys Lasdun's joyless concrete bunkers are now seen as the problem. Moans David Hare: "Subsidised theatre, because of those bloody car parks, has become more and more bourgeois in whom it attracts, whereas the West End gets the young crowd."

Across the river, meanwhile, the West End is no longer bourgeois. With no parking lots to take up all the room, the theaters of Shaftesbury Avenue and Covent Garden jostle for space with bars and restaurants and the other fashionable haunts of Central London. When David Hare's *Amy's View* transferred from the National to the West End, the author was aghast to discover the average age of the audience dropped by twenty years. Sir Ian McKellen, the celebrated knight and gay, has savaged National theatergoers for being too white, too straight, too old, too upper-middle class. It seems that none of the people good socialists like Hare and McKellen would like to attract—the young, the blacks, the gays—drive cars, especially not in congested central London. So the only demographic for whom the National's unique selling point—the bloody car parks—has any appeal is the one Hare and McKellen despise: the middle-class, middle-aged, middle-brow bores from the 'burbs.

Everything's being blamed on the parking lots these days, not least the sad fact that the National's supposedly more "accessible" productions have failed to broaden the audience: the easily accessible parking apparently puts people off the easily accessible plays. And all the more accessible plays do is dumb down the existing audience. "It is wrong to say the National is becoming more accessible by just putting on shows such as *Godspell* or *Fiddler on the Roof* for the millennium," says Peter Gill, a director at the National Theatre under Peter Hall. "It is perhaps true that my brother, who grew up with me on a council estate, would enjoy *Godspell* if the ticket price was low, but what they are really doing is softening the repertoire for the same old set of people. They won't put on anything too hard for the middle-class audience." So the National Theatre now does *Oklahoma!* and *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*—both archetypal examples of the kind of commercial West End musical and play the taxpayer-funded National was supposed to be an alternative to.

Meanwhile, on Shaftesbury Avenue you find strange plays, quirky musicals, foreign imports, left-wing agitprop, tacky revues, topical re-enactments of controversial courtroom transcripts, sullen contemporary dance troupes clanking around to atonal dirges—not as lucrative as the blockbuster musicals but commercially viable, nonetheless. How many of these productions are any good is another matter. But, as Disraeli said, replying to Queen Victoria's complaint that there were not many good preachers, "Ma'am, there are not many good anything." A theater in which bad plays cannot get on winds up, inevitably, as a theater in which no plays get on. And, if we're really interested in "celebrating diversity," it seems to me that both the product and the audiences represent the full spectrum of modern

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Britain, admittedly a pretty ghastly place. In other words, simply by satisfying their need to turn a profit, the West End theater owners have done a better job of minority outreach than all those wretched Lila Acheson Wallace/NEA-funded U.S. regional theater programs.

Not everyone sees it like that. Simon Gray and Harold Pinter, respectively author and director of *The Late Middle Classes*, were critically acclaimed out of town and were supposed to transfer to the Gielgud Theatre. But at the last minute Stoll Moss, the theater owners, decided to go with *BoyBand*, a trashy spoof of boy pop groups. Pinter was left with what he calls "a deep sense of shock and betrayal," but, so what? The adolescent audiences at *BoyBand* are as entitled to a play dealing with their concerns as the Gray/Pinter groupies are to the umpteenth outing by their heroes. But, Pinter's petulance aside, there is certainly a curious paradox in the current London theater: it would seem the only thing uncommercial in the West End these days is what we used to know as commercial theater.

For that reason alone, I'm happy to welcome Ronald Harwood's *Quartet* to the Albery. *Quartet* is an example of what was once the West End's staple boulevard fare, peopled by a quartet of . . . well, not exactly stars but the kind of familiar legit faces that audiences used to insist on. Harwood himself is a reliable West End hand with an eye for effective pegs to hang a drama on—most recently, *Taking Sides*, about the conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler's interrogation by a U.S. Army major in post-war Germany. This time his subject is again musical, but, as it's opera, Harwood is cheerfully shameless about constructing his evening on contrivances more usually associated with the lyric stage. The time is now, the place a retirement home for musicians, wherein three opera singers are spending their senior years: Reggie (Alec McCowan) is quiet and fastidious, Wilfred (Donald Sinden) is fruitily jovial and sex-crazed, and Cissy (Stephanie Cole) is affable and straightforward, except for an odd tic of assuming that everyone she talks to is just back from Karachi. The final member of the quartet is Jean (Angela Thorne), the biggest star of the four, formerly and disastrously married to Reggie, and now coming to join her old colleagues in the home. The operatic mechanics of the plot are a pretext for a sharp, witty, tender meditation on old age, culminating in the annual Verdi concert, in which the four elderly singers come together for the quartet from *Rigoletto*. The finale—even though you can see it coming a mile off—is a tour de force that wraps up the play in the most satisfying way.

You'll notice that I haven't yet mentioned what for the last two decades has been the most visible strain of British theater in New York. But that's because London's most brutal offensive has effectively ceased. The other week, at a party at *The Spectator*, I ran into Tim Rice, who'd just come from a meeting with one of Cameron Mackintosh's lieutenants: "I said to him, 'It's over, isn't it?' He said, 'Basically, yes.'" He meant that, though the Mackintosh organization will continue to reap millions from its worldwide productions, the era of automatic biennial mega-smashes has ended. This month, one of those big multinational Brit-hit blockbusters will do the previously unthinkable: close. After ten years at Drury Lane, *Miss Saigon* has reached the end of its run, raising the at least theoretical possibility that the *Cats* slogan—"Now And Forever"—might actually prove to be mere hyperbole. *Whistle Down the Wind* and *Martin Guerre*, the latest efforts from Andrew Lloyd Webber and the *Les Miserables* team of Boublil and Schönberg, are unlikely ever to come to New York. Mackintosh is as busy with his various benevolent activities on the London fringe, at the National, and at Oxford University as he is with his global empire. Besides, he's now Sir Cameron, Rice is Sir Tim, Lloyd Webber is Sir Andrew but has since been further raised to Lord Lloyd-Webber of Sydmonton: it is an unviolable law of the English peerage that a baron cannot have two un-

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hyphenated names—hence, Lloyd Webber has been obliged to adopt the hyphen he's spent the last thirty years writing to careless newspaper editors complaining about. In a sense, this is a traditional evolution: in Britain, vulgar young upstarts are effortlessly annexed by the establishment. A couple of years back, at a party thrown by the TV host Sir David Frost, I was sharing a joke with Tim Rice and the Irish rock star Bob Geldof, the lead singer of the Boomtown Rats who received a knighthood for his efforts on behalf of starving Ethiopians. We were interrupted by Andrew Lloyd Webber. "Sir Timothy!" he said, with an elaborate Gilbert and Sullivan bow. "Sir Andrew!" Sir Tim reciprocated. "Do you realize," Geldof said to me, "you're the only one here without a fokkin' knighthood, you useless fokker."

True. But, gilded with honors, the men who created the British monster musical now find themselves chairing charities and royal commissions, speaking in the House of Lords, and being received at Buckingham Palace. Which ought to be good news for the Americans. Except that, for various reasons, the forthcoming West End season will see more musicals than ever before—and, with the exception of the soi-disant Broadway hit *Fosse*, they come from anywhere *but* Broadway: *Notre Dame de Paris*—this year's Victor Hugo musical—is a French show by a Quebecois lyricist; *Napoleon The Musical* is by two Anglo-Canadians; *Lautrec The Musical* is by Charles Aznavour. I don't know whether any of these fellows ever bothered contacting Broadway producers, but the truth is it would be unthinkable for any of these productions to premiere in New York. Big deal, you scoff; who wants to see a guy wandering around with a hump on his back or his arm tucked into his shirt or shuffling around down on his knees singing bad French pop songs? But even the Americans have wised up: succeeding *Miss Saigon* at Drury Lane will be Cameron Mackintosh's latest production—John Updike's *The Witches of Eastwick*, adapted by a couple of unknown American writers who figured out that Broadway is a waste of time for new work of any kind.

Finally, a word for Shakespeare, who surely belongs to the world but who is still simultaneously best served and worst served by his native land. Greg Doran's new production of *Timon of Athens*, at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon, almost does full justice to that extraordinary, violent, bitter play, but, as is traditional on these occasions, one is obliged to put up with distinctive conceptual touches—I enjoyed the Duke Ellington incidental score (from the early Sixties), but Apemantus has shades and a microphone for some reason, and Timon's parties are so camp you'd think you were at an Oxbridge dining club. Yet in the end these are mere quibbles. In Michael Pennington's performance, the play's linguistic muscle is flexed to the full.

Editor's note: We wish to call our readers' attention to the publication of *Night Battle: Poems* by William Logan (Penguin, $15.95), portions of which first appeared in *The New Criterion*.

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The media

Stupidity at work

by James Bowman

Oh dear. The news out of Washington is that Congress is going to investigate the state of our tastes and morals and specifically, according to Mark Preston in *Roll Call*, "the decline of America's culture" as evidenced by "the recent acts of violence that have engulfed the nation." In case you, like me, have been living quietly in "the nation" without any awareness of having been "engulfed" by violence, allow me to interpret. A couple of teenagers from well-to-do homes outside Denver shot up their high school last April, killing a dozen other teenagers, a teacher, and themselves. You may have heard about it. The media thought it a much bigger story than other recent incidents of the kind partly because more than the usual number were killed and partly because the outrage was committed by the issue not of some trailer park in Arkansas but of good middle-class, gym-enhanced loins like those belonging to the media elite. Suddenly, evidence that school shootings were on the decline notwithstanding, we were "engulfed"—by the coverage if not by murderous teenagers.

Naturally enough, if the media think so, Congress thinks so too. Senator Sam Brownback of Kansas, said to be "the driving force" behind the proposed special committee, told Preston that "What we want to do is take the long view and the deep view of how did we get a culture the way it is today that has got so much violence and so much hatred, destruction, and mayhem that is a part of it?" According to Jacqueline Trescott of *The Washington Post*, the committee "would look at broad cultural issues, such as divorce and the breakdown of the family. But it would also examine the impact of the entertainment industry and its products, such as sexually explicit videos. It would also highlight successful efforts to combat family problems, teen violence and tragedies like teen suicide." In short, in Brownback's words, "We just need to ask where our culture has gone and how do you bring it back to where we all want it."

If there were any chance at all that such questions could be answered politically, the effort would be a worthy one. But there is no such chance. Just suppose, to take a wildly hypothetical example, it could be demonstrated, as conclusively as social science can demonstrate anything, that there is a direct correlation between, say, single parenthood and teenage violence. Does anyone suppose that a bipartisan committee (as Senator Brownback hopes his will be) could even be got to say so, let alone to do anything about it? There are too many votes in play from divorced and single parents who would be quick to charge that the politicians were "blaming the victim." It's true that the firearms and entertainment industries are more easily attackable targets, and one could imagine a bipartisan committee roundly criticizing both. The Republicans would give the Democrats the

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gun lobby and the Democrats would give the Republicans the entertainment lobby, at least for rhetorical purposes. Neither lobby commands enough public sympathy to make it worth wrecking the bipartisan façade.

But such rhetorical strategies are easy and familiar by now. They are examples of what the twenty-four-year-old Harvard graduate Jedediah Purdy criticizes, in *For Common Things: Irony, Trust, and Commitment in America Today* (Alfred A. Knopf), as "therapeutic politics" which, though well-meaning, "does not find a way to turn intention into action" and, indeed, "is a political version of the popular belief in the potency of fantasy." It is obvious that no one on either side would be willing to risk the political nightmare of actually trying to confiscate even a significant proportion of the 200 million guns in private hands or to censor the media. Nor should they. I leave to others the task of pointing out the hopelessness of real gun control (as opposed to the symbolic kind the Clinton administration supports) in America and confine myself to pointing out the hopelessness of any attempts at censorship.

As it happens, *The Weekly Standard* published in its August 23rd number an argument for censorship by David Lowenthal, a professor emeritus at Boston College and the author of *No Liberty for License: The Forgotten Logic of the First Amendment*. Professor Lowenthal makes as good a case as anyone is likely to do for "regulation" (as he prefers to call it) of the media, but the most telling fact about his article is that, of the four leading conservatives that this conservative journal sought to comment on it, William J. Bennett, Terry Eastland, Irving Kristol, and Jeremy Rabkin, not one agreed with it except "in principle"—which, as Kristol said with characteristic shrewdness, "must rank among the saddest phrases in the English language. When someone says he agrees with you in principle, that is usually prefatory to his explaining that he disagrees with you in fact." And fact, as he didn't need to add, is where it counts. The letters to the editor two issues later were also overwhelmingly opposed.

If even conservatives unhampered by the need to trim to the winds of popular opinion are unwilling to attempt a return to censorship, what are likely to be the chances for such a return by an act of Congress? I am reluctantly driven to the conclusion that talk of censorship is the "therapeutic politics" of the right. And yet we used to have censorship of movies and TV—in the form of the Hays Code, established in the 1930s, and the "Broadcast Code" established in 1952. Why do we not have these things anymore? The answer lies partly in the cultural fragmentation of the 1960s and 1970s. In particular, frankness about sex—if not always sex itself—had for so long been considered a progressive cause that by the time of the political polarization of the 1960s, the most committed to the cause were willing to regard sheer pornography as progressive. Then we got used to it, as we did to so many others of that decade's relaxations.

But the main reason why censorship has been discredited is that it is always stupid in practice, and whatever else it could prevent it could not, in America, prevent people from saying *that*. Although it hung on in some form until cable TV finally put an end to it in the 1980s, the Broadcast Code, for example, could never live down its inherently ridiculous attempts to prevent the Smothers Brothers from making political comments on TV. Non-stupid people might suppose that political commentary from such a source would be self-discrediting, but, by trying to stop it, the upholders of broadcast standards made Tommy and Dickie into unlikely heroes of free speech.

Thus is it ever. Censorship always censors the wrong things for the wrong reasons and produces, though perhaps after some delay, the opposite of the intended effect.

And although the right are occasionally inclined to plead *nolo contendere* to Mill's charge that conservatives are "by the law of their existence the stupidest party," the attempts at censorship by the left are quite as

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stupid, quite as likely to mistake symptoms for causes and take words and images as meaningful apart from their contexts. Just look at the stupidity of those who advocate removing *Huckleberry Finn* from libraries and school or college reading lists on the grounds that it uses the word "nigger" some two-hundred-and-thirty times.

We saw the same kind of stupidity at work only last year with the release of Adrian Lyne's film version of *Lolita*, which almost failed to find a distributor in this country because of fears that its depiction of sex between an adult male and an underage female would be found offensive, as it doubtless would have been found if there had been a national board of censors deciding on whether or not the film was fit for viewing. I reiterate: this is because censorship is stupid. The film was in fact a powerful portrayal not only of the reason why such sex acts as it presents us with are forbidden but also of their connection to America's postwar sexualization of childhood. Unlike Stanley Kubrick's film version of the novel of 1962, or, for that matter, the novel itself, it removes all the moral ambiguity about Humbert Humbert's passion for his nymphet—without ever losing its sympathy for Humbert or his personal tragedy.

This deeply moral experience would almost certainly have been forbidden us by a censor on the grounds that it showed us at all the thing it so deeply disapproved of. But that is a literary judgment which is (one must suppose) beyond the putative censor's area of interest or, indeed, intelligence. Censorship always tends thus to gravitate toward the superficial at the expense of the substantial, and I wonder if Professor Lowenthal sees any reason to suppose that some similar stupidity would not be characteristic of the sorts of people he could induce to act as censors. All the indications seem to me to point in the direction of the conclusion that we have became stupider rather than smarter since the censors packed up their blue pencils and went home.

For example, the latest edition of *Flash*, the newsletter of the worthy and unquestionably conservative Media Research Center, tells us that an affiliated organization called the Parents Television Council, also headed by the head of the MRC, L. Brent Bozell, has instituted something called the "Green Light Film Award" in order, says the newsletter, "to honor positive family-friendly movies." The first recipient of the award is the animated film adaptation of Ted Hughes's *The Iron Giant*, which the citation calls a "superbly scripted and drawn film that carries a substantive, positive message while containing a minimum of offensive material." It would be interesting to know what the person who wrote those words thought *was* the "substantive, positive message." Could there be a reason he does not mention it—substantively—and instead goes on to stress, after the manner of his kind, the "minimum of offensive material"?

That last is certainly true, by the way. There is no unseemly, cartoon flesh exposed, no dirty words uttered. But the "substantive, positive message" is positive only from the point of view of left-wingers, environmentalists, and pacifists. The film perpetuates the left's mythology about the anti-Communism of the 1950s as having been the product of a "witch-hunt" mentality, while it portrays the armed forces and the federal government's security agencies as being in the control of murderous thugs whose itchy fingers on the nuclear trigger almost start World War III. The film's adult heroes are a single mother and a beatnik, living in a rural town the rest of whose inhabitants are mere credulous dupes; its child hero is set up to learn a lesson in environmentalism and gun control as well as the habit, much more typical of 1990s Hollywood than of 1950s small-town America, of regarding the democratically elected government of his country as the enemy of its people's peace, freedom, and happiness.

True, this "message" is not aimed at persuading children to go in for indiscriminate sex or violence, but it is at least arguable

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that the wanton distortion of history and the portrayal of civic culture in *The Iron Giant* are actually worse things for children to be exposed to. And yet the well-meaning folks at the Parents Television Council, so far from even pointing this out, give the film an award. What can account for such a lamentable failure of literary perception? The answer is hardly far to seek, and is neatly summed up in a brave piece in the September *Harper's* by Francine Prose, "I Know Why the Caged Bird Cannot Read." That brilliant title, just a smack at Maya Angelou, is both a positively Angelouvian mixed metaphor and a synecdoche for Miss Angelou's disastrous influence on the teaching of English in this country.

Basing her assessment of that influence on the experience of her own two sons and a collection of some eighty high school reading lists, Miss Prose deplores the "lemminglike fervor with which our universities have rushed to sacrifice complexity for diversity." The result is that kids have "slogged repeatedly through the manipulative melodramas of Alice Walker and Maya Angelou, through sentimental, middlebrow favorites (*To Kill a Mockingbird* and *A Separate Peace*), the weaker novels of John Steinbeck, the fantasies of Ray Bradbury."

It is not only the inferiority of these books which makes kids turn off to literature (and thus, necessarily, to the possibility of making literary judgments) but also the way they are taught.

> Only rarely do teachers propose that writing might be worth reading closely. Instead, students are informed that literature is principally a vehicle for the soporific moral blather they suffer daily from their parents. The present vogue for teaching "values" through literature uses the novel as a springboard for the sort of discussion formerly conducted in civics or ethics classes—areas of study that, in theory, have been phased out of the curriculum but that, in fact, have been retained and cleverly substituted for what we used to call English. English—and everything about it that is inventive, imaginative, or pleasurable—is beside the point in classrooms, as is everything that constitutes style and that distinguishes writers, one from another. . . . The question is no longer what the writer has written but rather who the writer is—specifically, what ethnic group or gender identity an author represents. . . . Meanwhile, aesthetic beauty—felicitous or accurate language, images, rhythm, wit, the satisfaction of recognizing something in fiction that seems fresh and true—is simply too frivolous, suspect, and elitist even to mention.

As an example of the tendency, she mentions as notable for its "chilling echoes of New Age psychobabble" *Teaching Values Through Teaching Literature* by Margaret Dodson, which reveals that "the point of Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* is 'to show how progress has been made in the treatment of the mentally disadvantaged, and that more and better roles in society are being devised for them [and to] establish that mentally retarded people are human beings with the same needs and feelings that everyone else experiences.'"

In some ways, Miss Prose overstates her case. Doubtless, there are still old-fashioned English teachers here and there. And what can she mean when she attributes "special prosecutors" to this kind of teaching? If she had said "hopeful censors" instead, she would have been nearer the mark. But in some ways she understates it. This is clearly the tendency of the culture. An example that occurred to me was that of young Jedediah Purdy, mentioned above, whose very earnest treatise full of twenty-four-year-old wisdom purports to be a critique of, among other things, irony. Interestingly, young Mr. Purdy's conceptual mistake about irony turns out to be exactly the same as that of the censor who fails to appreciate that meaning varies with context—the fundamental principle of all irony.

Criticizing irony is like criticizing algebra: you may not like it or understand it, but only children suppose that their feelings on the subject are of any interest or importance. It is there to be understood whether

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you like it or not. And it must be understood by educated people if they are to understand literary texts—or, indeed, much of everyday discourse. For one of Purdy's intelligence and intense moral seriousness to take as his example of "irony incarnate" the "Seinfeld" television show is a sad commentary on the education he received at Phillips Exeter and Harvard. It is also sad for American education in general, which has decided that the pressing demands of "moral blather" of one sort or another make an acquaintance with the style and meaning (as opposed to the names and reputations) of the great, and greatly moral, ironists of the Western tradition something to be reserved for specialists.

The result, as we now see, is that we have books about irony by twenty-four-year-olds whose knowledge of the subject comes from television and whose bibliography does not include even the names of Chaucer or Cervantes or Molière or Voltaire or Dryden or Swift or Pope or Johnson or Dickens or Twain. What he sees as the "irony" of "Seinfeld" is actually, like that of so much of the popular culture (see, for example, Kurt Andersen's new novel *Turn of the Century*, which is full of it), a double irony—irony about being ironic. This undercuts (as it is intended to do) the moral seriousness and purpose of simple irony and so produces the Seinfeldian nihilism which is what Purdy really objects to. I suppose it is something to be hopeful about that the moral hackles of this "Generation Xer" (a title which, to give him his due, he deplores, though Douglas Coupland's name *does* appear in the bibliography) have been raised, but it would make us feel a lot better if we thought he knew what they had been raised *about*.

Not that his ignorance will be any bar to his stardom, as we can see from Marshall Sella's celebration in *The New York Times Magazine* of his accomplishment—as well as his being the home-schooled (until he went to Exeter) product of West Virginia hippies. After noting that criticism of what he, too, calls "irony" has nowadays become fashionable (Steve Martin, David Foster Wallace, and John McCain are quoted), Sella proceeds to subject this lad, whom he describes as looking "just like that Fine Young Man whom every father wishes his daughter would bring to dinner," to the full *New York Times* celebrity treatment. Here, he says, is a "fair-haired boy who not only professes decency but exudes it from every respectful pore," a sort of latter-day cornpone hero being taken up by the bright young things at *The New York Times*.

I wonder if that is something that young Mr. Purdy would describe as "ironic"? The Fine Young Man's book against irony and in favor of earnest sincerity, Mr. Sella tells us, "landed on the desk of a twenty-seven-year-old assistant editor named Leyla Aker, who was about to consign it to the Knopf slush pile when she paged through it on a whim." She was "impressed" and passed it along to Ashbel Green, a senior editor. "I thought we could reach a young audience with this book," he quotes Ms. Green as saying. "If we got lucky, and it took off, it could be a little like *The Greening of America*." In other words, irony having been fashionable for a few years, like wider ties, Knopf was willing to put down a $75,000 advance as a modest wager that irony was now about to endure a spell of unfashionability.

The mention of Charles Reich's *The Greening of America*—which, as younger readers may not remember, was a runaway bestseller in 1970—is revealing. For it seems unlikely that even the hippies (like Jedediah's parents?) who welcomed the book at the time could possibly re-read it today with anything but embarrassment. In hindsight it is so obviously an example of the naïveté of the peace-and-love generation at its most starry-eyed that Ms. Green cannot have made the comparison with anything substantive in mind—though certainly in their naïveté substantive comparisons are interesting. *The Greening of America* stands out in her mind solely as an example of a publishing phenomenon.

Yet somehow it turns out that the market-

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ing of anti-irony looks a lot like the marketing of irony. "Only later did Aker learn that Purdy was twenty-four and a homeschooler," writes Sella, who quotes Ms. Green as recalling: "I said, 'You've got to be kidding!' . . . It may sound like we chose him from Central Casting, but that's not the way it worked. The kid from nowhere had valuable things to say." Of course he did. Knopf then "packaged its hot new property in a cover so exquisitely plain that it looks like a high-tech Quaker prayer book, with a thin red border to suggest reliability and a sea of white space around the title. 'We wanted a design that was simple,' says Aker, 'something that would hark back to the eighteenth-century, when politics was a part of life.'"

Any irony in the idea of so packaging sincerity? If so, homespun Jedediah simply ignores it. "Purdy is unaware of most of the publishing decisions involving his book," writes Sella. "He jokes that Knopf leaves him in the dark about all the sausage-factory details to keep him unsullied. 'I have a sense,' he says, 'that they think I'm rather fragile.'" And, indeed, he *is* rather fragile. Sella goes on to recount the young(er) Mr. Purdy's schooling in the wicked ways of irony at Calhoun County High School in West Virginia, which he attended briefly at the age of thirteen and where, he says, he "didn't know that you can't just talk about whatever you're interested in—that you must choose your topics with an eye to general interest." Sella tells us that "Jed was always offering up thoughts on such teeny-bopper faves as aid to the Contras and gun control."

Irony alert! Irony alert! "Such teeny-bopper faves"? I wonder what Jedediah, whose teddy bear as a child, we are told, was called Teddy, must think of that? Later, when he went to Harvard, he found that part of the initiation ritual was a showing of the movie *Love Story*, at which the audience was encouraged to interject their ironic comments into the dialogue. "Appalled by such cavalier treatment of a serious illness, Purdy stomped the perimeter of Harvard Yard, then dashed off a letter to *The Crimson*. 'I felt this was a hideous practice,' he says. 'Placing this at the beginning of the orientation seemed an induction of students into a cold, self-satisfied manner.' Jed's war on what he calls 'unchecked and unchallenged' irony had begun."

Fragile? I think so! But to Sella he seems to resemble those Shelley-like poets, those sensitive plants, that used to make such a social success in the earlier part of the century.

> Late one afternoon, Purdy's duties include picking blueberries from a patch out back. Dropping the berries into a Folger's coffee can, he eats more than a few, as his favorite food is "fruit that is just short of ripe." At one point, he spills his whole meticulously gathered can of berries on the hard ground. But Purdy can't interrupt his spoken essay on "the intractability of the human predicament" while he cleans up his mess. Through any number of workaday activities—bathing in the pond, looking for road signs from behind the wheel of a car—he never lets go of a rhetorical thread. Language carries him, of its own will, to the sensual warmth of its epiphany.

"The sensual warmth of its epiphany"? No wonder people are buying his book! An acquaintance with irony might suggest that mention of the "sensual warmth" of language's epiphany may in one context be merely a clumsy reaching after rhetorical effect and in another a slyly calculated attempt to sell the kind of people who read *The New York Times Magazine* on the attractiveness of the New Austerity. I wonder, too, if the editors of that magazine reflected for even a moment on the irony of Jedediah's glamorization by Mr. Sella's appearing in the same week that the cover story is about how the entertainment industry's sudden demand for stars for the teenage market has all the young actors and actresses in Hollywood trying to look as if they're sixteen. Any connection, I wonder, with the birth of a new intellectual celebrity at twenty-four? Well, if so, presumably neither *The New York Times* nor Jedediah Purdy will ever know it.

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Books

Puritans & destiny

by Keith Windschuttle

The thesis of Kevin Phillips's enormously ambitious, in some ways beguiling, but fatally flawed book *The Cousins' Wars*[1] is that there are strong cultural connections between the English Civil War of 1640–1649, the American War of Independence of 1776–1783, and the American Civil War of 1861–1865. In each case, the protagonists on both sides were very much the same kind of people with the same religious beliefs, political affiliations, and economic interests. And rather than representing three distinct contests, the wars should be seen as the deciding events in a long process that led from the origins of English Protestantism in the sixteenth century to the global dominance of the American political and economic system in the twentieth.

Over three centuries, Phillips argues, similar sides were taken in each of these three wars. On the long-term winning side were the constituencies of commerce, industry, the maritime sector, the centers of immigration, the principal cities, low church evangelical religion, and the proselytizing middle classes. The long-term losing side was based on landed agriculture, with its feudal remnants and servitude; its hierarchical and liturgical religion; and its greater ratios of horsemen, soldiers and cavaliers. "At each point in each nation's history," the author writes, "it was a necessity—perhaps it was also a destiny—for the former to push aside the latter." Ultimately, he wants us to see the present globalization of liberal-democratic politics and market-driven economics as both the fulfillment of the English Reformation and the irresistible emergence of a new imperial community of English-speaking peoples. "*Not since Rome . . .*" are the book's concluding words.

In the English Civil War, Phillips argues, the Parliamentary side was led by Puritans and other low church Protestants who came predominantly from East Anglia, especially the heartland counties of Norfolk, Suffolk, and Essex plus the adjoining shires of Hertford, Cambridge, Huntingdon, and Lincoln. They were predominantly artisans and small manufacturers and many had connections to the maritime industries. They were the first backers of westward expansion, that is, expansion across the Atlantic. The Puritans who led the exodus to the American colonies of New England between 1629 and 1640 originated within a circle fifty miles in each direction from the East Anglian town of Groton, Suffolk. These eastern counties had traditions of liberty that stretched back centuries. They had been settled by Angles and Jutes, and in the Middle Ages had comparatively large ratios of freemen and small numbers of *servi* and *villani*. This was where Anglo-Saxon opposition to the Norman invasion had been the fiercest and lasted the longest.

1 *The Cousins' Wars: Religion, Politics, and the Triumph of Anglo-America*, by Kevin Phillips; Basic Books, 707 pages, $35.

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The cavaliers who supported the king in the Civil War were predominantly high church Anglicans, Roman Catholics, the aristocracy and rural gentry. Their ethnic background was more Norman and Celtic than Anglo-Saxon. The heartland of royalist support, Phillips says, was the north and the west of England. This was where Charles I recruited his army and raised his standard. The economic base of royalist support was manorial agriculture and most soldiers in the king's army were the laborers and servants of large agricultural estates. The principal industrialists who supported the king were the holders of royal monopolies. Royalists and cavaliers were opponents of westward expansion.

The American War of Independence, Phillips argues, should be regarded more as a civil war within the colonies than as a colonial revolution against the crown. He says American historians have not done a good job of explaining the actual wartime loyalties and politics. Once these are seen in terms of British religious and ethnic tribalisms from the 1640s, many of the gaps can be filled in and the oddities explained. In 1775–76, Phillips writes, the colonies seethed with seventeenth-century memories, suspicions, and analogies. The war was led by New England Yankees, the direct descendants of the original Puritan settlers. They reproduced many of the political interests as well as the political geography of their ancestors. The "powder keg of the American revolution," Phillips says, was located in counties called Suffolk and Essex (in Massachusetts Bay), as well as in places like Boston, Norwich, Chelmsford, Billerica, Dedham, and Braintree—named by Massachusetts and Connecticut settlers for their East Anglian hometowns.

From New York south to Georgia, on the other hand, there were major concentrations of British loyalists and would-be neutralists. Here were the places, according to Phillips, where the colonists' struggle might have been lost, and here were the locales in which the fighting became a bitter civil war. In South Carolina, for example, there was a civil war in which 103 battles were fought with no one but South Carolinians on either side. There was a similar degree of acrimony in Pennsylvania.

The disagreements that led to the War of Independence show remarkable similarities, Phillips argues, to those behind the English Civil War. It was a fight over diverging interpretations of the rights of Englishmen. There were comparable objections from small producers to the policies of mercantilism and crown monopolies. There were protests by Puritans and other anti-Episcopalian dissenters against the monarchical imposition of Anglicanism and Catholicism. It was also an early version of class warfare in which less prosperous colonists were hoping to topple their own provincial elites, as well as the King and his English ministers.

Just as the victories of the Puritans in the English Civil War were not consolidated and, indeed, were to some extent reversed under the Stuart Restoration, so too was there much unfinished business at the end of the war of 1776–83, Phillips observes. The Articles of Confederation negotiated in 1787 left the United States with a great division between Northern and Southern interests. The federal system allowed slavery to flourish under political and constitutional protections unavailable in the British Empire.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the influence of Yankee New England was diluted by internal political divisions and by the triumph of Southern or Jacksonian democracy, which controlled the presidency for forty-two of the years between 1801 and 1850. It was not until the formation of the Republican Party and the election of Lincoln that the Yankees were in a position to resume the struggle of their ancestors. By this time, however, there had been waves of Yankee migration westward from the old New England heartland. This had led to the creation of what Phillips defines as Greater New England, a cultural region stretching west through upstate New York, Ohio,

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Michigan, and Minnesota to Oregon and Puget Sound. The American Civil War occurred, Phillips argues, because this Greater New England was at cultural, religious, and political odds with the Greater South.

Phillips claims that the South's population included a high ratio of forebears from the old English western and northern frontiers as well as from the eighteenth-century Celtic borderlands and mountain redoubts. So, once again, cavaliers and their Celtic-stock allies were lined up against the descendants of East Anglia. The structure of self-sufficient farms, shops, and manufacturies that was the basis of the economy of Greater New England was

> as incompatible with Southern slavery as the small-scale Puritan entrepreneurship of England's cloth districts, cheese towns, lead-mining hillsides, and cutlery centers of the 1640s had been with the late-feudal manor agriculture and royally bestowed wine, soap, and coal monopolies of Stuart England.

Phillips argues that these kinds of religious, cultural, and ethnic differences provided the underlying rationale for the U.S. Civil War. He adds that, by the 1850s, these differences had stalled commercial progress and economic expansion while the major cultural groupings sought to defend their own vision of the future of the nation and sought to prevent their opponents from realizing their own.

Once the war started, however, and there was no Southern presence in Washington, Republican politicians and Northern capitalists pushed through Congress what Phillips calls "nothing less than a neo-Hamiltonian revolution." This included a national banking system, uniform federal bank notes, a vast increase in national debt, a wide range of new taxes, a record level of tariffs to protect Northern manufacturers, a Northern transcontinental railroad route, and the Homestead Act, which would ensure westward expansion went ahead without slavery. The Yankee victory in the war unleashed Yankee economic dynamism that would eventually make the United States the most productive and richest country in the world.

> [I]t is hard to avoid the sweeping assessment that the U.S. Civil War was another great watershed in which victory went to the zealous, skilled and destiny-minded minority—the principal cadre of which just happened to be descended from the intense and grasping Puritan and Yankee minority that had also been the largest single force in the two previous cousins' wars.

Phillips argues that each of the three wars was necessary. Each followed a prelude of at least a decade in which there had been attempts to resolve the underlying religious, cultural, and economic conflicts between the parties. When politics failed, war broke out. He acknowledges that there are historians who in each case have claimed that the resort to warfare was unnecessary and that, had different political tactics been adopted, violence need not have arisen.

> Once, quite possibly. Twice, conceivably. But not three times. Wars with the continuity of these are not accidents, needless eruptions, or the product of a misled and gullible public. Their origins go deeper . . . three times, during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, that same resort to arms would be accepted—after long debate, and when no other course remained—to resolve profound internal differences.

The Phillips thesis is attractive in several ways. At a time when others are claiming America is a multicultural society, the author is quite right to remind us of the essential Englishness of the course of much American history. Moreover, he does not hitch the long-term course of history to a one-dimensional model based on, say, economics, as most leftist or quasi-Marxist explanations still do. Phillips weaves religion, culture, geography, politics, and economics

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into a consistent multi-variable account. Indeed, he is persuasive in pressing the notion that among the cultural groups he discusses, it was religion that was the most powerful factor at work, influencing both the kinds of economic activity its adherents undertook and their political predilections. This certainly accords much better with the mentality of the English-speaking peoples from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries than the more familiar economic determinist models.

Phillips also makes an energetic attempt to provide a coherent account of many apparent anomalies in the loyalties on both sides of the U.S. Civil War, such as why many New Yorkers supported the South, why much of the upper South was reluctant to join the Confederacy, and why the Butternut Midwest was as equally disdainful of Northern abolitionists as of Southern slave owners. Phillips uses his well-established expertise as an electoral analyst to provide a convincing county-by-county dissection of the cultural and religious factors and regional loyalties at work in the U.S. federal elections of the 1850s and 1860s.

But none of this is sufficient to save the thesis. It stumbles badly at its very first hurdle, that of the English Civil War, and never recovers. Phillips simply hasn't consulted enough of the research on this topic that has been published over the last twenty-five years. He provides a very short bibliography on the events of 1640–49 that includes five works by the English Marxist Christopher Hill, two by Lawrence Stone, and seven other books published between the 1920s and the 1960s. He is apparently unaware that the work of these authors has been subject to a sustained process of re-examination since 1975. None of the revisionists who have played well-publicized roles in this re-examination—Conrad Russell, Paul Christianson, Mark Kishlansky, Anthony Fletcher, Kevin Sharpe, Jonathan Clark, among others—are listed in Phillips's bibliography, and it appears he hasn't read them. Had he done so, he would have been forced to reconsider his account of the Civil War and especially the role of the Puritans in it.

The Civil War of the 1640s was not a Puritan revolution, nor did the Puritans have the kind of dominance that Phillips attributes to them. Anglicans, Presbyterians, and even aristocrats were more politically influential on the Parliamentary side. Moreover, the Civil War, it is now widely accepted, was not a manifestation of underlying social forces erupting onto the political terrain. The conflict did not represent any deep-seated dissatisfaction in the community at large but was predominantly the product of divisions among royal councillors. The revisionists have explained the Civil War as the outcome of short-term political problems, a breakdown in the fiscal system and disagreement over the forms of the church, which was itself an issue with long antecedents. In other words, it was neither a manifestation of irresistible cultural and religious forces nor of progressive ideologies. Rather, it was a conflict among England's political and religious elites. Had the king and his advisors managed the early disputes more adroitly, the war need never have happened. Moreover, if Phillips's thesis about the political geography of seventeenth-century England is correct, the industrial revolution a century later should have been the product of those intense and grasping Puritan entrepreneurs of East Anglia. Instead, it emerged primarily in the English Midlands and the north and northwest, the very regions of the country that Phillips claims had long been the bastions of feudal agriculture, liturgical religion, royalism, and reaction.

While interpretations by historians of the U.S. Civil War remain more diverse than that of its English predecessor, there is still a healthy body of opinion that supports a not dissimilar case to that of the Stuart-era revisionists. In America, debates over issues like slavery and secession went deep into popular culture, as one would expect in a literate democracy with universal male suffrage. But on the eve of the war, out-and-

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out Northern abolitionists and Southern secessionists were both relatively small groups. Rather than a groundswell of social forces, it was the decisive actions of a political elite in the lower South that brought on the war and forced the rest of nation to take sides. No more than any other of its kind was the U.S. Civil War a product of historical necessity.

The claim that the events of 1861–65 liberated the northern entrepreneurial spirit and allowed the full flowering of American capitalism is also contentious. While there was certainly a tremendous growth of industries and cities after the war, the expansion of railroads actually slowed and historians still debate whether the war impeded or stimulated industrial progress. In other words, the notion that the English and American Civil Wars were the products of an historic destiny struggling to fulfill itself runs counter to the findings of what is now the leading academic opinion about the former and a respectable body of interpretation of the latter. Phillips's thesis fails to properly address these alternative explanations.

One thing that the contemplation of history should teach us is that there is no such thing as destiny in human affairs, there are no outcomes that had to happen or were meant to be. History is made not by social forces that are irresistible but by men who are fallible, and most often by political elites acting on information that is imperfect, producing consequences that are unforeseen. Sometimes they act wisely, looking to the true interests of their countrymen and drawing on the best of their cultural and political heritage; sometimes they act dangerously and foolishly. The resort to warfare has very often been of the latter kind. And how many more times do we need reminding that throughout the entire span of Western history the most dangerous and foolish notion of all has been that a particular people have now assumed the mantle of Rome and are destined to rule the world?

A tragic figure

Matthew Spender From a High Place: A life of Arshile Gorky. Alfred A. Knopf, 417 pages, $35

reviewed by E. V. Thaw

Arshile Gorky is just as troublesome a personality today, some fifty-one years after his suicide, as he was to his "loves," his friends, and his enemies while he lived. His name was not Arshile Gorky, and he was not, as he claimed, a nephew of the Russian writer Maxim Gorky. He was not even Russian at all, but an Armenian who fled as a teenager from the terrible genocide by the Turks in 1915.

His Armenian nationality and nostalgia for his village, Khorkam, became the leitmotif of everything Gorky did, both artistic and personal, in spite of his claims to be Russian, to have studied in Paris, and to have attended Brown University. In fact, although he arrived in America early enough to have become assimilated, and most of his friends, girlfriends, and wives were sophisticated Easterners, he was never really comfortable in American culture, remaining rather a primitive European in his language and his behavior, especially towards the women in his life. And, in spite of the long apprenticeship he underwent in Boston and New York on his unsteady and protracted pathway to maturity as a painter, he retained a more European than American vision as an artist. It was commented upon at the time by Clement Greenberg.

Gorky had excessively strong outbursts of emotion all his life and was subject to terrible depressions. At the end, in spite of the loving self-sacrifice of his wife, Agnes Magruder nicknamed Mougouch, and the solicitude of their many good friends, Gorky seems to have collapsed mentally into self-pity and paranoia. He became so physically violent that Mougouch and their two very young daughters had to flee to her family's home in Virginia. Left alone, Gorky roamed New York day and night until friends took

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him back to his Connecticut studio. There he telephoned everyone he knew and then hanged himself in a little shed on a neighbor's property with "Good-bye my loves" written in the sand beneath his feet.

It is true, of course, that he had suffered some serious setbacks in his last years. A barn fire which he set accidentally destroyed a considerable batch of his work, and cancer had forced him to get a colostomy which required complex eating and cleansing regimes. However, Gorky produced at least twenty-seven paintings in a paroxysm of work after the fire and was recovering remarkably well from his cancer. The mental deterioration came at a time when his fame and success were just emerging from the shadows, although he sensed the beginning of some competition from his ex-acolyte Willem de Kooning and from Jackson Pollock. In short, Gorky's life and his carefully masked persona are a tissue of lies, contradictions, false leads, dead ends, and still unsolved mysteries.

All this Matthew Spender tries bravely to deal with in his new biography of the artist, *From a High Place*. Mr. Spender is uniquely qualified for the task since he is an artist himself and well acquainted with the world of galleries, critics, curators, patrons, and the lot, and he is married to Gorky's older daughter, Maro. He has therefore had many years' exposure to the family folklore and has been a close enough insider to learn all that could be learned from his mother-in-law, Mougouch, who is still very much alive and whose stamp on this book must be acknowledged.

Yet this is no bowdlerized life. Spender gives us the warts and all, trying as best he can to explain, but not to explain away, the tragedy-inducing contradictions in Gorky's character. Spender has had access to Mougouch's diaries and we are privy to a remarkably complete, almost day-by-day, account of his movements, contacts, moods, and mood-swings which illuminates brightly the dark corners of Gorky's last years, which were also his greatest years as an artist. Spender's exemplary research has uncovered new material about the New York art world of the 1920s, 1930s, and early 1940s and gives vivid depictions of the survival strategies of artists during the Great Depression: the mural projects of the WPA, the friendships, politics, and intellectual connections of the more advanced painters and sculptors of the time. Cameo appearances on this stage by Stuart Davis, Fernand Léger, Willem de Kooning, J. J. Sweeney, Alfred Barr, Pierre Matisse, Julian Levy, and many other familiar names put into focus that much-studied time better than any other account I know.

At the beginning of the Second World War, many Surrealists who fled Europe arrived in New York, congregating at the galleries of Pierre Matisse, Julian Levy, and Peggy Guggenheim. Their presence created a new and very positive atmosphere for Gorky whose work loosened and whose paints thinned to take advantage of so-called "accidents." He was deeply impressed with the example of Matta and consciously sought to surpass him, attracting the approval of André Breton, the high priest of Surrealism, then in New York to escape the war. Breton urged Gorky to go to Paris where he promised to make him a star.

Spender's account begins with Gorky's childhood in the Armenian area of Lake Van in Northeastern Turkey. Peasant superstitions, walled gardens, semi-ruined ancient monasteries, his strong-willed mother, who was deeply attached to this medieval peasant world, all come vividly alive in these pages drawn from many interviews with the survivors of Gorky's extended Armenian family. Gorky himself, with his art world friendships and his marriage to a certified Eastern Wasp, would launch into wailing chants at parties or dance alone with arms in the air in some Greek-like Mediterranean step, but would refuse to answer or would give misleading replies whenever questioned about his youth, his real name, and his family.

After arriving in the United States, living with various family members, and deciding to become, as he put it, "a great artist or a

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great crook," Gorky began to fashion the complex persona which enmeshed him in an ever deeper quicksand of lies. He was forever trying to overcome his limitations by a bit of plagiarism. While teaching at the Grand Central School of Art in New York in 1926, he published an interesting poem in the school yearbook. Unfortunately, as Spender tells us, it was written by Siamanto, an important Armenian poet. As his career progressed and as he sought to fight his way towards a position in the ranks of the modernists he read about and saw illustrated in magazines like *Cahiers d'Art*, he became another kind of plagiarist, painting near-Cézannes, Braques and Picassos that skirt the edges of forgery. Nearly all critics and art historians have noted Gorky's curiously protracted apprenticeship in which he copied now one style, now another of the principle European modernists.

The story of the Newark Airport murals, which Gorky painted in 1936 under the Federal Art Project of the WPA, is well told by Spender who stresses Gorky's apolitical stance in the 1930s when, all around him in the intellectual and artistic milieu of New York, the Communist Party was a dominant force. While disdaining Communism and its tentacles, Gorky curiously never wavered in his defense of Stalin as a Russian strongman with whom he could identify; he had learned in his childhood to prefer Russians to Turks. Temperamentally he preferred the strongman in politics (or as we now call him, the dictator) not because he was a fascist but because as a man he saw himself as a dictator of his family, expecting from wives and children total obedience and suppression of self.

With all the strutting, posturing, and excessive heartiness alternating with depressed moods, Gorky must have been a tiresome person to be close to. Indeed, he was always breaking angrily with his friends and assuming enemies, whether real or not. Yet he seemed also to have had lovable, vulnerable, and deeply touching qualities which appealed to the few who stayed loyal to him. The dichotomies of his character are reflected in his work. Even the most freely painted and apparently improvisational works are, in fact, carefully composed and often based on squared-up drawings in the standard academic practice. In more than one instance he made nearly identical second versions of such seemingly spontaneous paintings; in one case, he made three.

In his eagerness to scale the success ladder, Gorky paid unseemly attention to the praise Clement Greenberg gave to one of the less finished paintings in his first Julian Levy Gallery show. Gorky's subsequent bout of work focused entirely on paintings in a similar style, interrupting the more fully painted, denser paintings which are his real masterworks. What about those masterworks, which, as Spender points out, have survived and are now finally in great museums like the Metropolitan, MOMA, and the Tate? Our author remains strictly a biographer and does not make any critical assessment or art historical claims for Gorky's position. Certainly he can be called the first Abstract Expressionist and, because of the war and the Surrealists, he was a bridge between the American and European aesthetic positions. He must also be credited with making some of the most sheerly beautiful paintings and drawings by any artist of his time. But he was never truly original. The cribbing from Miró and Matta, and some early Kandinsky, is unmistakable. While Matta never painted a canvas as beautiful as Gorky at his best, one could argue that had Gorky never lived and painted the history of art would not have to be revised very much. He never made the breakthrough that de Kooning and Pollock did, both reaching fulfillment just about the time that Gorky died.

Spender makes no mention of Harry Rand's curious iconographical exercise of claiming to identify the exact subject matter underlying these seemingly abstract drawings and paintings.[1] Nor is any mention

1 *Arshile Gorky: The Implication of Symbols* by Harry Rand (Allanheld & Schram, 1981).

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made of the somewhat unsatisfactory catalogue raisonné of all Gorky's work edited by Jim M. Jordan with an exemplary introduction by the late Robert Goldwater (the best short description of Gorky's work and his position in art history).[2] What we do have in this fine biography is a sympathetic and clarifying account of a consciously hidden and distorted life, deflating some myths and coming close to the real story of a tragic figure whose quixotic poses and ultimate suicide may have had more to do with his work reaching the limit of his powers than with his medical condition or marital troubles.

Saturated with the word

Michael Warner, editor
American Sermons: The Pilgrims to Martin Luther King, Jr.
The Library of America, 939 pages, $40

reviewed by Marc M. Arkin

After Edward VI's coronation in 1547, the radical group of English reformers known as the Puritans took every opportunity to complain to the young king—that "blessed ympe"—about the "Dumme Doggs, Unskillful sacrificing priestes, Destroying Drones, or rather Caterpillars of the Word" who occupied the pulpits of England. As they attempted to recapture the ethos of the primitive church, these Puritans focused on the importance of the spoken word, beginning with Jesus's Sermon on the Mount. They reminded themselves that the greatest of the church fathers, such as Augustine, had been powerful preachers. And they invoked the admonition of St. Paul, echoed by John Calvin, "How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher? . . . So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God."

In particular, the Puritans were outraged that so many ministers of the established church substituted affected eloquence for sound scriptural knowledge and indulged themselves in "fonde fables to make their hearers laughe, or in ostentation of learning, of their Latin, their Greke, their Hebrue tongue, and of their great reading of antiquities." Instead, the Puritan clergy aligned themselves behind the "plain style" of the Cambridge divine William Perkins. As followers of Perkins, they wore simple Geneva gowns and delivered sermons that were straightforward explications of scripture, divided into three sections: an expanded reading of the "text," a discussion of the "doctrine" embodied in it, and, finally, the "use" or "application" of the text and doctrine in everyday life. By the 1630s, for their nonconformity, the Puritans found themselves deprived of their pulpits by Charles I and his Archbishop of Canterbury, William Laud. Many of those dissatisfied with the Church of England—clergy and laity alike—emigrated to the fledgling settlements of New England so that they could properly attend to the means of grace embodied in the spoken word of an educated ministry.

New England, it can therefore be argued, was founded so that men and women could listen to sermons. And, listen to sermons they did. From the very first, in 1630, aboard the ship *Arbella*, barely clear of English waters, the earliest cluster of settlers destined for Massachusetts Bay heard the future Governor John Winthrop preach "A Modell of Christian Charity," with its vision of a Christian commonwealth that would be a light to the old world and its attendant warning that in case of discord or failure "wee shall be as a Citty upon a Hill" for all to see.

Once established in New England, settlers could hardly get enough of the sermons previously denied them. There were

2 *The Paintings of Arshile Gorky: A Critical Catalogue* by Jim M. Jordan and Robert Goldwater (New York University Press, 1982). See my review in *The New Criterion* (September 1982).

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sermons both morning and afternoon on Sunday, a weekly Thursday "lecture," and sermons for every occasion from civil elections, fast days, funerals, and ordinations, to militia elections and public executions. So insatiable was the New England appetite for preaching that ardent parishioners took down their ministers' words in shorthand so that they might study them at leisure; especially significant sermons were often revised and printed for wider consumption. The atmosphere was so saturated with the word that, in the late 1630s, even the minister Thomas Shepherd could observe "we have ordinances to the full, Sermons too long, and Lectures too many, and private meetings too frequent."

For their part, ministers strove for vivid preaching: memorizing lengthy texts and speaking from the barest of outlines. They spoke on every subject from salvation and the duties of the Christian life—the cultivation of "weaned affections" toward the undeniably good things of this world—to the proper conduct of government officials—"nursing fathers" toward the community—from New England's "errand into the wilderness" to "the late stupendous growth of witches." They took to heart Thomas Hooker's 1659 advice, "It's not enough that we be stirring in the house, and people be up, but we must knock at mens doors, bring a Candle to their bed-sides, and pinch the sluggard, and then if he have any life he wil stir." Yet, these were also literate, thoughtful, sophisticated addresses, aiming at both heart and intellect. As Perkins himself remarked, "the Minister may, yea and must privately use at his libertie the arts, Philosophy, and variety of reading, whilest he is in framing his sermon: but he ought in publike to conceale all these from the people, and not make the least ostentation."

The sermon, thus, occupied a central place in the development of a distinctive American culture. Arguably, the first "national" event was not the colonies' resistance to the Stamp Act of 1765 but the Great Awakening of the 1740s—precipitated by the revival tours of George Whitefield, the great English Methodist preacher. Thousands of people, both north and south, flocked to hear Whitefield preach, and reports of the "surprising work of God" occasioned by his sermons appeared in colonial newspapers from Georgia to Massachusetts.

As a peculiarly American art form, the sermon became a bellwether for the wider culture. Thus, after the revolution, a more democratic brand of evangelical religion came to dominate American life. And, while the spoken word retained its importance in American Protestantism, its expression changed. The rapid growth of egalitarian denominations, including the Baptists and the Methodists, with their embrace of frontier religious institutions such as the camp meeting and the lay exhorter, led to an upsurge in extemporaneous preaching, with an emphasis on informality and emotionalism.

Although the earlier tradition of structured pulpit eloquence survived in certain prosperous urban enclaves through the Gilded Age, much of Protestant America grew accustomed to an extraordinarily vernacular sermon, what Perkins cautioned against as "barbarism" in the pulpits. By the late nineteenth century, at one end of the spectrum, the so-called Princes of the Pulpit—theological liberals such as Henry Ward Beecher and Phillips Brooks—held forth in polished, if sentimental, phrases to sophisticated and wealthy congregations, while at the other, itinerant evangelists, such as Dwight Moody and Billy Sunday, pioneered a more downmarket version of the sermon, a cleavage that, at the risk of oversimplification, persists to this day. Indeed, as religion moved to the margins of American intellectual life during the twentieth century, the role of the learned sermon as a vehicle for serious public discourse was all but forgotten—until the "rediscovery" of the Puritan tradition in the 1950s by such scholars as the late Perry Miller.

The Library of America's admirable new volume *American Sermons: The Pilgrims to Martin Luther King, Jr.*, edited by Michael Warner, a professor of English at Rutgers

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University, is a long overdue effort to "reclaim" this "neglected aspect of American literature" and to make it available to a wide readership. The collection consists of fifty-eight sermons by fifty-three authors, arranged chronologically from the seventeenth century to the twentieth. The authors range from such well-known figures as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Joseph Smith (founder of Mormonism), and Fulton J. Sheen, to those known only to specialists, such as Devereux Jarratt, an Anglican evangelist active in backcountry Virginia and North Carolina during the last third of the eighteenth century. The sermons range from the representative—Thomas Shepard's 1641 "Of Ineffectual Hearing the Word"—to the individually significant—Jonathan Edwards's 1741 "Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God"; from the spiritual—Solomon Stoddard's 1698 "The Tryall of Assurance"—to the political—Jonathan Mayhew's 1749 "A Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission and Non-Resistance to the Higher Powers."

The themes alter in subtle ways over the years. The nineteenth century shifts from social reform—opposition to war with Mexico, antislavery, and feminism in the Quaker Lucretia Mott's 1849 "Uses and Abuses of the Bible"—to a greater focus on personal salvation after the carnage of the Civil War. Among the twentieth-century entrants, there are sermons concerned with ecclesiastical matters—Harry Emerson Fosdick's 1922 "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?"; ecumenicism—Abraham Joshua Heschel's 1967 "What We Might Do Together"; and racial equality—Martin Luther King's sermon of April 3, 1968. These were issues unknown to the Puritan pulpit in its golden age, when dissenters could be banished to Rhode Island and everyone took it for granted that "God Almightie in his most holy and wise providence hath soe disposed of the Condicion of mankinde, as in all times some must be rich some poore, some high and eminent in power and dignitie; others meane and in subjeccion." Even the incentives for religious belief have changed. When Puritans sought salvation, they emphasized that the proper end of man was to glorify God; in the 1950s, Fulton J. Sheen told a television audience that "the possession of God is happiness" in a talk entitled "How to Have a Good Time."

The black church, fundamentalists, liberals, neo-orthodox, Catholics, and Jews all find their voices in this anthology. There is even a sermon by C. L. Franklin, a pillar of the black church through the 1960s, now better known as the father of the singer Aretha Franklin. And, while it is possible to differ with a few of the selections—I would have preferred Emerson's "Divinity School Address" with its poetic evocation of New England spring to his "Lord's Supper Sermon" and was a little put off by Zora Neale Hurston's dialect transcription of an otherwise unknown black preacher's sermon—and to wonder at the absence of figures such as the nineteenth-century evangelist Charles Grandison Finney ("Lectures on Revivals of Religion"), the ecclesiastical busybody Lyman Beecher ("A Plea for the West"), the educational liberal Horace Bushnell, or the founder of Christian Science, Mary Baker Eddy—by and large, it is a well-chosen group of works.

Following the Library of America format, the anthology presents the sermons as pieces of literature *simpliciter*, unadorned by footnotes or commentary, an approach that has both benefits and drawbacks. The benefits come from the reader's ability to appreciate the works themselves without distraction. The disadvantages are that, for the early sermons especially, some explanatory notes might well have enhanced that appreciation. After all, how many of us can quite put our finger on the meaning of Robert Cushman's 1621 question "what doth this shifting, progging, and fat feeding which some use, more resemble any thing then the fashion of hoggs?"—although "progging" certainly does have a ring to it. In addition, the brief biographical sketches at the end of the volume—enormously well done though they are—might have been fleshed out and af-

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fixed to the sermons so that the casual reader could more easily date the pieces and place the authors in historical context.

The broader disadvantage of the format—and one which Professor Warner could do nothing to remedy, since you can only play the hand you're dealt—is that the later sermons largely lack the literary appeal of the earlier ones; the stark presentation only highlights their limitations as literature, whatever their historical significance. Indeed, they amply document the progressive "dumbing down" of our public intellectual discourse. There is something urgent about the early Puritan sermons at their best—rigorous, challenging, pungent, imbued with a vivid sense of language and intellectual adventure. Although the twentieth-century sermons, in particular, address many of the same civic and spiritual concerns, they smell either of the academic study or of the street. Gone is the awareness of an appreciative and reflective audience of serious lay listeners; in its absence, sentimentality and the cult of personality do for both argument and eloquence. However, all is not lost. The literary enthusiast, at least, can take heart that almost half of the sermons in this collection were delivered before 1800; even among those drawn from the antebellum period, few stand outside the New England tradition—which is, after all, where the sermon flourished as a truly American art form.

Poseur poser

Patricia Albers, Shadows, Fire, Snow: The Life of Tina Modotti.
Clarkson N. Potter, 382 pages, $30

Pino Cacucci, Tina Modotti: A Life.
Translated by Patricia J. Duncan.
St. Martin's Press, 224 pages, 24.95

reviewed by Stephen Schwartz

Tina Modotti (1896–1942), Hilton Kramer wrote in *The New York Times*, was once known as "Edward Weston's mistress and model during his crucial Mexican period, [who] was also an accomplished, if minor, photographer in her own right." Today, however, she is probably better known than Weston, at least in the universities.

Born in Italy, raised in San Francisco, and morally tarnished if not murdered in Mexico, Tina Modotti has become an icon of the academic Left: a kind of junior partner to Frida Kahlo. Unlike Kahlo, she does not bear the cachet of physical handicaps or such extra assets, for a representative of the fabled "other," as Kahlo's Jewish background. But Modotti has an item in her biography that has made her as appealing to tenured revolutionary fantasists: Modotti was a full-time functionary of the Stalinist movement during the 1930s.

No amount of campus- or museum-based idolatry can promote Modotti's art above the "minor" level identified by Mr. Kramer. Still it is useful to study the life of Tina Modotti because she stands as perhaps the best representative of all those personalities of the 1930s whose ideals, for those who truly possessed them, were betrayed, and whose lives were ruined by Stalinism. These two books demonstrate the extent to which the Modotti cult has grown, while also showing the limitations of American publishing. Each book, in its own way, is an appalling product.

Patricia Albers's offering is by far the worse. Its author communicates her limitations in the opening pages; while describing Modotti's death, she writes that her heroine's "last flickering perceptions are of darkness, solitude, and drift." It is hard to prove such a claim wrong, but it would be interesting to have it sourced.

Mrs. Albers writes in only one mode: gushing enthusiasm. Every event in this book—which covers some of the most terrible episodes in twentieth century history—is treated as if it were a party with great refreshments and wonderful favors. Mrs. Albers brings to the story of Tina Modotti, art photographer and secret police agent, the sensibility of a suburban matron hosting

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a reception for a visiting feminist professor. This is, perhaps, appropriate, or at least authentic, in that Modotti has become a heroine precisely to that elite class which, for three generations in the industrialized nations, has dealt with its neuroses by making up roles as Third World revolutionaries.

Mrs. Albers had the good fortune to locate a trunkload of papers held by the survivors of Modotti's early companion, the San Francisco artist Roubaix de L'Abrie Richey, nicknamed "Robo," and she has used these materials to pad the first third of this book. But the portrait she paints is an unwittingly unpleasant one, and the reader is fed with pompous generalities and clichés, often based on pure speculation.

Thus, we are told of the young Tina's reaction to Italian setbacks in World War I,

> the military debacle had cut off communication with the family in Italy, leaving Tina, [her sister] Mercedes, and [her father] Giuseppe frantic with anxiety. Was Tina also experiencing guilt that she had been absorbed in play-acting as her loved ones suffered? If so, it was not the last time she would anguish over the thought of art making in the face of human affliction.

Tina Modotti was a deceiver born, who, in her adolescence in the North Beach section of San Francisco, learned two dangerous things. One was that she was a good actress; the other was that such talents might be better turned to seducing and controlling friends and acquaintances than to pursuing a real stage career before audiences that knew they were audiences and that she was only acting.

For the rest of her life she acted out characters: as an aesthete—"Madame de Richey"; as the photographic assistant and disciple of Edward Weston; and as a Stalinist terrorist. She played each of these with sure instincts for the right gesture, consummate attention to detail, and, above all, an extravagant sense of drama. But each remained a role; she never matured beyond play-acting. She was an aesthete when poses about the "Religion of Art and Beauty" were already discredited by the carnage of the First World War. She was a photographer who never grew beyond imitation of Weston. And while she claimed, with her Stalinist peers, to be a proletarian revolutionary, she was mainly a bureaucrat. But, of course, it might also be said that the Stalinist Comintern only played at revolution, and that the intellectuals who flocked to it were all, in one manner or another, poseurs.

The depiction of Modotti's early relationship with the distinctly weedy Robo Richey is drenched with the aesthetic posturing to which they both surrendered themselves. This was a pose that at the time they assumed it, in the late 1910s, was overripe. Some twenty-five years had passed since the heyday of the great San Francisco artistic rebels—"Les Jeunes," which included the typographer Porter Garnett, the versifier Gelett Burgess, and the essayist and novelist Frank Norris—but Modotti and Robo acted as if *The Yellow Book* had just appeared on the stands and Oscar Wilde were about to drop in for dinner.

After Modotti has written her tenth or twentieth letter to Weston offering him rose petals and acclaiming the beauty he had brought into her life, one really wishes she, rather than Frida Kahlo, had been hit by a streetcar. But Modotti was soon to move from her delirious aesthetic self-indulgence to the Stalinist nightmare of the political will to power.

She went to Mexico, first with Richey but later with Weston, whom she had met while working as a model. Weston taught her to take photographs, but her early productions were undistinguished. We are told that Richey published drawings in *Gale's Magazine*, a radical journal issued in Mexico City in English, but research on such a topic, which might have produced a valuable contribution, is too much for Mrs. Albers. Instead she coos, "the pair relished the bravado of seeing Robo's signature on the cover of a Communist magazine during the

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period of the so-called Red Scare, when U.S. Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer was unleashing raids on suspected radicals."

Richey died of smallpox in Mexico City, leaving Modotti to commandeer Weston's salon, already dominated by Communist intellectuals, and which thanks to her soon included the American Comintern agents Bertram and Ella Wolfe. This circle included the prominent artists and activists Diego Rivera and David Siqueiros. Modotti attached herself to Rivera as well as Frida Kahlo. Modotti also joined a Mexican neo-futurist avant-garde group, *Los Estridentistas*, And, influenced as much by their interest in technological images as by the revolutionary chatter swirling around her, Modotti began producing "modernist" photographs of an openly propagandist character.

She was following fads, without evincing real artistic strength: she went easily from portraits of Weston, still posing in the manner of a turn-of-the-century dandy, to floral studies to stagey images of workers and peasants in struggle. The latter fascination, however, led to her involvement with one of the most shocking events in the history of Stalinism: the assassination of Julio Antonio Mella, a Cuban-born Communist whose real name was Nicanor McPartland. Mella was Modotti's lover. He was not her first sexual-political attachment as she had already been the lover of one of Stalin's most fearsome terrorists: a shark-like fellow-Italian named Vittorio Vidali.

Even today, the killing of Mella remains an unhealed wound, exemplary of the impact of Stalinism. Mella had gone into exile in Mexico after a flamboyant career leading the revolutionary opposition to the Cuban dictator Gerardo Machado. Mella had become a prominent Communist but was sympathetic to Trotsky, a quote from whom appears on the sheet in his typewriter in a famous photograph of the machine taken by Modotti. That photograph (*Mella's Typewriter* or *La Técnica*, 1928) appears as an illustration to this book without elucidation by Mrs. Albers.

Mella was shot on January 10, 1929, while walking with Modotti, who was clinging to him. The bullets passed through him but missed her, exciting the suspicion of Mexican detectives. During the ensuing investigation, she demonstrated her theatrical talents to the maximum. Photographs taken in the aftermath of the crime show her transformed from the determined, dominating personality visible in her "family pictures" with Richey and in Weston's portraits into a trembling, naïve child-woman. Rivera and others declared that Mella had been killed on orders from Machado, and the Mexican police cleared Modotti of involvement. But intraparty Communist gossip, from the moment of Mella's death to the present, has insisted that Mella was killed for his Trotskyism—the first individual in the world to be executed for that infraction.

Mella became a deathless symbol of Communism in Latin America, and the controversy over his murder has been especially troublesome in Cuba. With the conquest of power in 1959 by Castro's radicals, whose relations with Cuba's official Communists were rocky at best, it was widely expected that the Machado government archives would be opened and the debate settled forever. But no such disclosure occurred. The conflicting versions of the Mella death were revived earlier this year, on the seventieth anniversary of the assassination, A considerable quarrel erupted on H-DIPLO, an internet discussion group on diplomatic history administered at Michigan State University. Cuban functionaries strove mightily to deny any claims that Mella might have fallen afoul of Stalinist orthodoxy. In a typical comment, Carlos Alzugaray, a high official with Cuba's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, wrote "If it is of course essentially pernicious that 'official' history prevails in a country, it is also counterproductive and non-historigraphical [sic] to adopt the exact opposite position. By the way, I am sure that it is not only Cuba or the Soviet Union and the former socialist countries where 'official' history is practiced."

This discussion, if it may be called that,

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went on for some time until the entry into it of a Russian historian, Victor Kheifets, who had access to the Moscow archives. Kheifets demonstrated that, although the Cuban officials still denied it seven decades later, Mella had been expelled from the party. But the Russian historian also opined that final blame in his death could not be assigned. He wrote, "Machado's motive to kill Mella was strong enough . . . however, the case isn't proven yet. . . . If we want to find the direct proofs of Machado's responsibility, Cuban archives in Havana should be checked once more."

The Mella case is only one in a fairly long list of unresolved deaths of Communist dissidents outside the Soviet Union—the roster includes an American woman, Juliet Stuart Poyntz, whose disappearance from New York in 1937 has never been explained, but which stimulated Whittaker Chambers to make his break with the Soviet secret "organs." Nevertheless, regardless of the obstacles to a final elucidation of the Mella affair, one thing is sure: after it, Tina Modotti committed herself, willingly or otherwise, to the clandestine Stalinist apparatus for the rest of her days. And she never again publicly, or in secret Communist documents, alluded to Julio Antonio Mella.

Modotti was deported from Mexico in 1930, to a Germany in which the Communist movement was still powerful. Vidali, the sinister secret police agent, became her permanent companion and seeming protector. The next twelve years saw the eventual abandonment of photography as she graduated to propagandistic writing and then to administrative responsibilities in Russia itself, leavened by secret courier assignments abroad. She was recruited to work in the so-called International Defense for Class War Prisoners, known in the U.S. as the International Labor Defense. This body controlled a money-laundering and political espionage network of considerable extent and effectiveness. Characteristically, Mrs. Albers handles this reality with a chirpy, upbeat tone.

Mrs. Albers is equally problematic in dealing with the horrors of Stalinism. She baldly states certain facts: that the assassination of Soviet number two Sergei Kirov, in 1934, led to "years of monstrous carnage and terror;" that Vidali and Modotti themselves fell under suspicion; that during the Spanish Civil War, in which Vidali was a prominent figure, the anti-Stalinist leader Andreu Nin, head of the Partit Obrer d'Unificació Marxista (POUM), was kidnapped, tortured, and murdered by Soviet agents. She even points out that Modotti was involved in the murder of a dissident Communist who had come from Brazil to fight in the Moscow-controlled International Brigades, Alberto Bomilcar Besouchet. Besouchet's death came about because he had been associated with the Brazilian singer Elsie Houston, who was the ex-wife of the French surrealist and Trotskyist poet Benjamin Péret. Péret was also in Spain, and, like Orwell, barely escaped Stalin's henchmen.

Yet as devastating as such revelations should prove to those who idealize Modotti and other 1930s Communists, Mrs. Albers remains largely unmoved. "Tina most likely never set eyes upon Alberto Bomilcar Besouchet," writes Mrs. Albers. "Blinded by tyrannical self-discipline, desperation to win the war, and a belief in the value of correct ideology, the woman who braved hails of gunfire to save children's lives sacrificed Alberto Besouchet (and no doubt others) for what she believed to be the good of the cause."

From this point onward, the narrative assumes a rather somber cast. For Mrs. Albers it is all merely a tragic end to a life of festivities; and indeed, the fall of the Spanish Republic in 1939, made inevitable by Stalin's aggressive drive for control of the Loyalist side, saw considerable tragedy. Modotti and Vidali escaped to Mexico. But Modotti's time was short, very likely because the best description for her situation is an old cliché: she knew too much. On January 5, 1942, she attended a party at the home of a prominent

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German Communist exile. Late that night, she took a taxi home, but arrived at a hospital instead. There she died. The medical report listed the cause as a heart attack. Almost immediately, the rumors that circulated at the time of Mella's death were repeated; this time Vidali, who did not attend the funeral, was charged with her elimination. Mrs. Albers refuses to examine this possibility at length, writing that such accusations "are buttressed only by conjecture and circumstantial evidence."

The author of the second book on Modotti, Pino Cacucci, a convinced anti-Stalinist, goes further: he notes that, in the similar death of the anti-Stalinist Victor Serge, the victim's friends in Mexico City "maintained that in the 1940s the [local union] of taxi drivers was controlled by the Communist Party, which had used them to keep order at demonstrations and to carry out punitive missions." This charge is supported by the recent documentary releases, from the National Security Agency, of the decrypted KGB communications known as Venona.

Cacucci's book could have provided an excellent antidote to the weaknesses of Mrs. Albers, were it not disfigured in another way. Put simply, his book, which first appeared in Italian, has been murdered by inept translation and a complete lack of fact-checking. To list all the misspelled names, misattributed facts, and other mistakes in this edition would require a separate review. But Cacucci, at least, understands the full horror of Modotti's life, a life devoted to power over others.

The conquering zero

Robert Kaplan The Nothing That Is. Oxford University Press, 256 pages, $22

reviewed by John Derbyshire

Suppose I ask you to step into the next room, count the people in there, and report the answer back to me. What is the smallest number you can report? Obviously the answer is zero, corresponding to the case when there are no people at all in the next room. Thus it is plain that zero is the smallest of the counting numbers. It is also the smallest of the unsigned measuring numbers: the least possible distance between two points is zero, when the points coincide.

These simple facts, so easily stated, did not become generally understood until modern times—well into the sixteenth century in Europe and even later elsewhere. There is nothing like the history of mathematics to leave you thinking that people in the past were less intelligent than we. That is, of course, an illusion. The correct conclusion to be drawn from Robert Kaplan's book, which is accurately subtitled *A Natural History of Zero*, is that until words and symbols have evolved to denote a thing, that thing cannot be discussed or used; and that words and symbols for abstract entities evolve terribly, terribly slowly.

Mathematical entities—numbers, lines, functions—are of course the ultimate abstractions. The millennia-long struggle to get to grips with zero testifies to the deeply *unnatural* nature of mathematical thinking. Every mathematical truth is like that: extruded after unimaginable intellectual effort and lifetimes of frustration, against all the grain of ordinary human thought and language processes. In the preface to *Principia Mathematica*, Bertrand Russell noted that an everyday object like a whale is immensely more complex, on any scale of complexity that makes sense, than a number like "five"; yet the whale is much easier for the mind to name, encompass, and manipulate than the number. Any group of humans that was in regular contact with whales would certainly have a name for them; yet there are plausibly said to be primitive peoples that have no word for any number larger than three, though fiveness is right there, literally, at their fingertips.

The Nothing That Is ably documents humanity's long and weary groping toward the domestication of zero, with many curious

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and illuminating asides drawn from the author's wide field of interest. He knows Sanskrit, for example, and relates with gusto the astonishing array of names in that language for very large numbers—*Tallakchana*, should you ever encounter it, means a hundred thousand trillion trillion trillion trillion. Yet the Indians of the early first millennium who deployed these terms still had no proper word for zero, nor any real concept of it except as a "place-holder," a sort of punctuation mark. So we stumbled along right through the Middle Ages, the inability to comprehend zero's true status as a number contributing to countless errors and confusions—some of which, like the tedious quibbling about the true starting date of the new millennium, are still with us.

It was the Arabs, picking up where the Indians left off, who developed a regular symbol for zero. They passed it, with the other nine digits, to Europe, where these Arabic numerals were regarded with deep suspicion until the late Middle Ages. For one thing, they lent themselves to forgery: zero especially was all too easily transformed into six or nine. Arabic numerals were also slower and more cumbersome to compute with than the abacus, a skilled user of which can still beat anyone calculating with paper and pencil. Bookkeepers did their accounts on the abacus and published them as Roman numerals—which are useless for arithmetic—or with the figures written out in words. (One finds oneself wondering, not for the first time, how on earth medieval society managed to stay afloat.) Not until the invention of double-entry bookkeeping in the early fourteenth century did the use of Arabic numerals for computation begin to gain favor over the counting-board, supplying necessary power for the liftoff of science, capitalism, and modern statecraft.

In the latter part of his book, Mr. Kaplan gives over much space to pondering the thing that zero denotes, which is of course nothing. Here his ruminations must inevitably face comparison with one of the classic essays in popular mathematics, Martin Gardner's "The Significance of 'Nothing,'" which can be found in his book *The Night is Large* (1996). Mr Kaplan does not emerge well from the comparison. He has nowhere near Gardner's literary sensibility or fluency of style. The reader who wants to know something about nothing would be much more profitably engaged with Gardner. (Synchronicity alert: Amongst other topics, Gardner mentions the all-black canvases of the 1960s minimalist painter Ad Reinhardt and names various critics who praised them, including one Hilton Kramer.)

Oxford University Press is launching *The Nothing That Is* with an initial print run of 40,000—this at a time when the average literary novel is lucky to get 5,000. It is a grim paradox that publishers should be turning out popular books on mathematics with such enthusiasm just as the actual profession of mathematics is heading for a major crisis. Simon Singh's *Fermat's Enigma* was the darling of reading circles last year and the passing of Paul Erdös occasioned two biographies and a television program. Yet an article titled "The Sky Is Falling" in the February 1998 *Notices* of the American Mathematical Society reports that enrollment in advanced math courses at four-year colleges is dropping like a pebble (Latin: *calculus*) down a well, implying major job losses in college math teaching. The reason for this decline is not hard to fathom. Get an average degree in pure math and your career opportunities are pretty much restricted to commencing study for the Society of Actuaries's very stiff exams, after passing which you will start work at around $35,000. Get an equivalent degree in computer science and you can walk right into a job paying $42,000 even, apparently, in Kansas City. Since college math departments and computer science departments draw from essentially the same pool of applicants, the result (as mathematicians say) follows.

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Notebook

The triumph of Nirad Chaudhuri

by Christopher Carduff

Nirad Chaudhuri loved aphorisms. He reveled in their combination of wit, moral rigor, and compactness of expression; in what he called their "intolerance of commonplaceness"; in their ability to shock one into instant argument with their author and with one's own assumptions about life. He loved how they stick in one's mind like a burr, and, in nearly every sentence he wrote, he strove for the aphorist's ideal of pith, truth, clarity, and nettlesomeness.

He achieved it often. It is, indeed, the characteristic Chaudhuri note. It is there in the first line of the first book he published, in the famous dedication of *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*:

> To the memory of the British Empire in India, which conferred subjecthood on us but withheld citizenship; to which yet every one of us threw out the challenge: "Civis Britannicus sum," because all that was good and living within us was made, shaped, and quickened by the same British rule.

When Chaudhuri wrote this, in 1951, he was fifty-three years old. Independent India was only four—a thin-skinned toddler, quick to slap back when slapped. "No nationalist reader of my book needed to go further than the dedication to acquire a strong and unconquerable prejudice against me," Chaudhuri wrote some thirty-five years later. "This was not simply heresy, but treason, and it was the high-placed Indians, educated at Oxford and Cambridge, who resented the statement most violently." His words consigned him, in Delhi and Calcutta, to a spittoon reserved for him alone and whose slippery sides he could not scale. He became persona non grata, "a known un-Indian."

In the end Chaudhuri's dedication, and the scandalous success of his *Autobiography* in England and America, cost him his pension at All India Radio, where for ten years he'd worked as a writer on foreign and military affairs; AIR let him go, after a year of internal intrigue, mere weeks before retirement benefits were to have kicked in. Simultaneously, India's Minister of Information and Broadcasting, acting on a tip from AIR, met privately with those Indian editors who'd welcomed Chaudhuri's articles and told them they could no longer do so. This media ban was not officially lifted until 1970, when India was twenty-three —the age, it seems, that one becomes old enough to appreciate aphorisms. It was then that the government invited Chaudhuri to write a propagandist tract on his native East Pakistan. "The Government of India may have lifted its ban on me," he told his friend the Sikh writer Khushwant Singh, "but I have not lifted my ban on the Government of India."

These are old stories, and they were told again last summer, when Chaudhuri died, at age 101, on August 1. I read the Indian newspaper obituaries with interest, for signs

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of further mellowing in the official national attitude toward "Niradbabu." Not surprisingly, I found little. Most of the papers, acknowledging his international reputation as a writer, asked one or another of his admirers to write a warm, signed tribute. These, however, were invariably accompanied by unsigned editorials that gave with the one hand and took away with the other. The one in *The Times of India* was typical. In "his pronouncements on Indian affairs," it said, Chaudhuri got the problems and the "assumptions behind them" right, but "he slipped, and did so very often, on comprehending the reality of modern mass politics." He wrote brilliantly and with erudition about Europe and England, but "it was one which was dead and buried with Mozart, Jane Austen, and Lord Palmerston." "He lived a life devoid of compromises," but he lived it, like a Bengali Don Quixote, in a world "almost mythical and only partly real . . . an India which was entirely his own mental creation." In other words, Chaudhuri was brilliant in his own sphere—but that sphere was a mere soap bubble, coruscating high above a map of Victoria's vanished empire. He had nothing to say of relevance to modern India, or to the modern world.

I can almost hear Chaudhuri cackling—his laughter came in gleeful, high-pitched bursts—and saying, as he had said once before, "Of course my writings did not exert the slightest influence on Indian opinion! I do not feel ashamed for that. I know the definition of a prophet. . . . Even now my countrymen have not learnt to be afraid of me, and pay no heed to my writing. That is because their minds are so constituted that if they ever acquire an idea, whatever its value, they become impervious to a second idea, as if they were ova which, once they are fertilized by a racing spermatozoon, will at once grow a hard coat to prevent the entry of another."

In England, where Chaudhuri lived after 1970, the obituaries were better—more detailed, more understanding, certainly more stylish. *The Independent*, to its credit, said the necessary thing: that he was, quite simply, "India's most distinguished writer of English prose in the twentieth century." He was also "his country's most controversial commentator since independence: a lonely position he never regretted, maintained with real courage, and indeed grew to relish." The *Autobiography* and its sequel, *Thy Hand, Great Anarch!* (1987), were not really anti-Indian: they were, "as more thoughtful Indians realized, a heartfelt, often wonderfully lyrical pleading on behalf of the best of Bengal." They were also a forceful protest against the decline of modern Indian culture, which, as Chaudhuri never tired of saying, "was created by Indians . . . mainly Bengalis who had received their education in English . . . during the British rule, under the impact of European civilization."

The British papers, though, did as poor a job of handling Chaudhuri's criticism of the British as the Indian papers did of his criticism of the Indians. It fell to Tunku Varadarajan, an Indian writing for *The Wall Street Journal*, to hammer home the point that Chaudhuri's dedication of the *Autobiography* was as much a slap at the Raj as it was at the nationalists who so effectively dismantled it. "To the memory of the British Empire in India," it reads, "which conferred subjecthood on us but withheld citizenship"—or, in other words, "which ruled us, which educated us in its ways, but which never could accept us into its political life."

As Chaudhuri writes in *Thy Hand, Great Anarch!*, from the very beginning the British community in India "opposed all political concessions to Indians, and this they maintained until the end of British rule." Beyond that, "they aired their contempt for all classes of Indians blatantly," and "their rancor against any Bengali who wrote or spoke English well was as unrestrained as it was irrational." As a result, "they could drive all reasonable Indians to despair, but could not intimidate those who were driven by hatred." Chaudhuri could never forgive the British, whose rule was

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"the greatest and most beneficial economic and political phenomenon the world has ever known," for self-destructively inciting hatred among their subjects. Nor could he forgive their caving into it—their abandoning India, tail between legs, when the bombs began to explode. Worst of all, when the British departed, "all the advantages which they had in India by virtue of their Empire were bequeathed . . . to those who were opposed to it, and not to those who supported it." The pearls of British India were fed, by the British, to the swine.

Chaudhuri had limitless faith in empires —"empires as protectors and reclaimers of civilization," empires "whose imperialism is consistent with moral principles, with freedom, and with human dignity." But he knew that "to speak in favor of empires, including the British Empire in India, and to live in [present-day] England," was "like being a Lutheran in old Spain under the Inquisition. Even Torquemada's ferocity to the reformers cannot be compared with the zeal to burn which the British anti-imperialists have!" Little wonder that Chaudhuri's criticism of the British, both pro and con, was given short shrift by the British obit writers.

"The creation of the new Indian culture" —the culture which produced Tagore and the Bengali Renaissance—was, said Chaudhuri, "the greatest achievement of the Bengali people as well as the most important product of the cultural interaction which [accompanied] British rule in India." The beauty and incompleteness of this cultural creation—beautiful because it so naturally recast traditional Bengali art into Western forms, incomplete because there was no real political and cultural cooperation between the Bengali people and the British—is rendered poignant throughout all of Chaudhuri's writing. The writer himself was no doubt its finest flowering, as evidenced not only in his two volumes of autobiography but also in his other books on the Anglo-Indian encounter, especially his biographies of Robert Clive and Max Müller, and his books on Hinduism and the peoples of India.

Chaudhuri is invaluable, and will forever be invaluable, as a witness to what happened in twentieth-century India. He is invaluable, too, in the words of Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, as the very embodiment of perhaps his chief literary subject, namely "how the highest achievements of European culture can be effortlessly absorbed into the Hindu personality without making it any less convoluted, deep, wildly humorous, devious, or sublime." For this reader, at least, he is also invaluable as a great *penseur*, a later La Rochefoucauld, a coiner of aphorisms that stick in one's mind like a burr. I leave you with three:

> Unquestioning complacency; facile pessimism; chastened hope and unrebelliousness; a stern, almost exultant despair—these are the four stages in a man's maturing outlook on life.

> The distinction between a misanthrope and a moralist: A misanthrope despairs of himself as well as of his fellowmen; a moralist despairs of his fellowmen only.

> There is no greater misfortune than for a man to die with a sense of bitterness; he should die, not simply with reconciliation even, but with a sense of triumph, whatever his worldly lot has been.

"When I say triumph," wrote Chaudhuri, "I mean triumph over the worldly world." Chaudhuri's death, like the uncompromising work he left behind him, was, on his own terms, a triumph.

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Letters

Ezra Pound

To the Editors:

"It is wrong from beginning to end." These words of the Caterpillar, from Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, kept ringing in my head after reading Donald Lyons's essay on Ezra Pound in your June issue. Mr. Lyons must suffer from cloth ears to describe *The Pisan Cantos*, probably the greatest poem to come out of the Second World War, as "rhythmically inert and morally null." On the contrary they are full of humanity and have a live and wonderful music. If he listened to Basil Bunting's great reading of Canto 74, I'm sure he'd change his mind.

To turn to politics: he describes Pound as "a fanatical anti-Semite . . . in essence a Nazi." These statements show that Mr. Lyons has never read *The Cantos* in any depth. Despite Pound's admiration of Mussolini, no one can pin him down as belonging to one political faction, be it of the left or of the right. The abiding passion of his life was liberty—a passion he shared with Milton—another great epic poet whose political entanglements put his life at risk from the powers of this world.

The political thought of *The Cantos* represents an attempt to restore the Anglo-Saxon heritage—it is against unlimited sovereignty and therefore fundamentally anti-Nazi. Pound was a Jeffersonian who believed that the state, "the *res publica* means or ought to mean, 'the public convenience.' When it does not, it is an evil, to be ameliorated or amended out of or into decent existence" (*Selected Prose*, page 214). Closely knitted to this idea was Pound's conviction that the law must be above government: "thrones/ and above them: Justice" (Canto 94). "Law's aim? is against coercion" (Canto 96). This is at the core of the patriotic American cantos devoted to John Adams (Cantos 62–71) and will be the subject of those devoted to Sir Edward Coke near the end of the poem (Cantos 107–109).

Regarding the charge of anti-Semitism, the matter is much more complex than Donald Lyons suggests. In 1958 Pound began a letter to me "7 Feb/ to clarify and git started. I am 'of course' not antisemitic. I am merely against irresponsible oligarchy" and in an earlier letter he had written: "The enemy is IGGURUNCE, not jews or masons," but his statements about Jews were often contradictory and in his old age he told Allen Ginsberg that he regarded anti-Semitism as having been his "worst mistake."

There are very few anti-Semitic passages in *The Cantos* (there are no Jews in the hell cantos, 14–15), nor is there anything in Pound's work comparable to the anti-Semitic lines in Eliot's "Poems 1920" which manifest a physical revulsion to certain Jews. As Professor David Moody has written in an as yet unpublished essay: "Pound came to his anti-Semitism by way of his economics, more exactly through his war on usury . . . but when not engaged in that war Pound was not anti-Semitic. Hence our persistent difficulty: Pound was anti-Semitic, but at the same time he was not."

Also, when considering this subject, it is essential to take into account Pound's hatred of monotheistic religion: "The greatest tyrannies

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have arisen from the dogma that the *theos* is one, or that it is a unity above various strata of theos which imposes its will upon the sub-strata, and thence upon human individuals" (*Selected Prose*, page 51). One sentence from a c. 1940 essay with a title from Ovid "Convenit Esse Deos" gets to the heart of the matter: "Semito-phobia is better explainable as semi-conscious revenge on the race that has brought monotheism into general European circulation than by any other single or complex set of reasons offered or yet offered" (*Machine Art and Other Writings*, page 135).

To close on a personal note, whenever the subject of Pound and anti-Semitism comes up, I remember a conversation I had once with Pound's friend the English poet Ronald Duncan in which he dismissed the accusation with the remark, "He was incapable of meanness."

William Cookson
editor, *Agenda Magazine*

Donald Lyons replies:

Let's see now: Pound was not an anti-Semite, or he was, or he was and "at the same time he was not," or his anti-Semitism is to be excused as a subset of his "hatred" of monotheism or because he was not mean. It's sad, all this disingenuous squirming by cultists, because the gorilla—Pound's anti-Semitism and concomitant admiration for some of the century's ugliest tyrannies—is still in the room.

I have not heard Basil Bunting read Canto 74. Did he find "humanity" in its elegy for Mussolini ("the enormous tragedy of the dream . . . the twice crucified") and in its lines about "the yidd" leading "the goyim" to "saleable slaughter"?

I am, as it happens, no unqualified admirer of Milton, but to hear the author of the *Areopagitica* likened to a man who, during the Holocaust, repeatedly denounced "kikery" on Axis radio sickens me.

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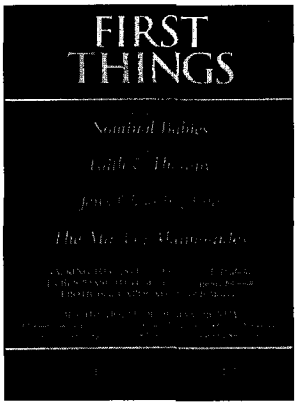

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